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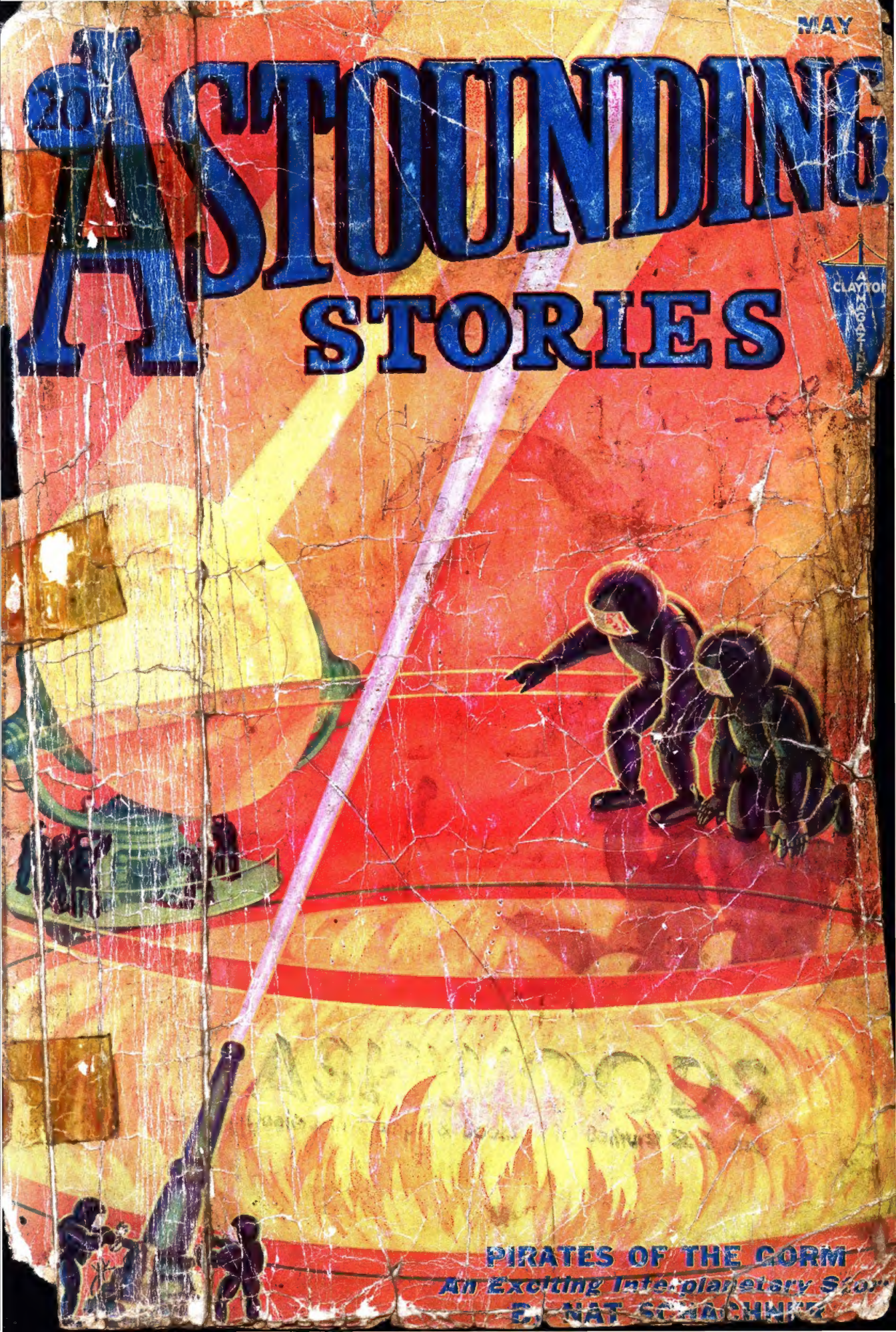

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CONTENTS

COVER DESIGN H. W. WESSO
Suggested by a Scene in "Pirates of the Gorm."

PIRATES OF THE GORM NAT SCHACHNER 149
The Trail of Vanished Space Ships Leads Grant Pemberton to a Marvelous Lake of Fire.

THE MARTIAN CABAL R. F. STARZL 168
Sime Hemingway, of the I. F. P., Strikes at the Insidious Interests That Are Lashing High the War Feeling Between Earth and Mars. (A Complete Novelette.)

THE GREAT DROUGHT CAPT. S. P. MEEK 218
Another Episode in Dr. Bird's Extraordinary Duel With the Scientific Wizard Saranoff.

WANDL, THE INVADER RAY CUMMINGS 234
In the Shadow of the Moon, Wandl's Space Fleet Meets the Armada of the Three Allied Worlds in Final, Titanic Battle. (Part Four of a Four-Part Novel.)

THE BLUFF OF THE HAWK ANTHONY GILMORE 256
"A Trick? Carse Was Famed for Them. A Trap? But How?"

THE READERS' CORNER ALL OF US 279
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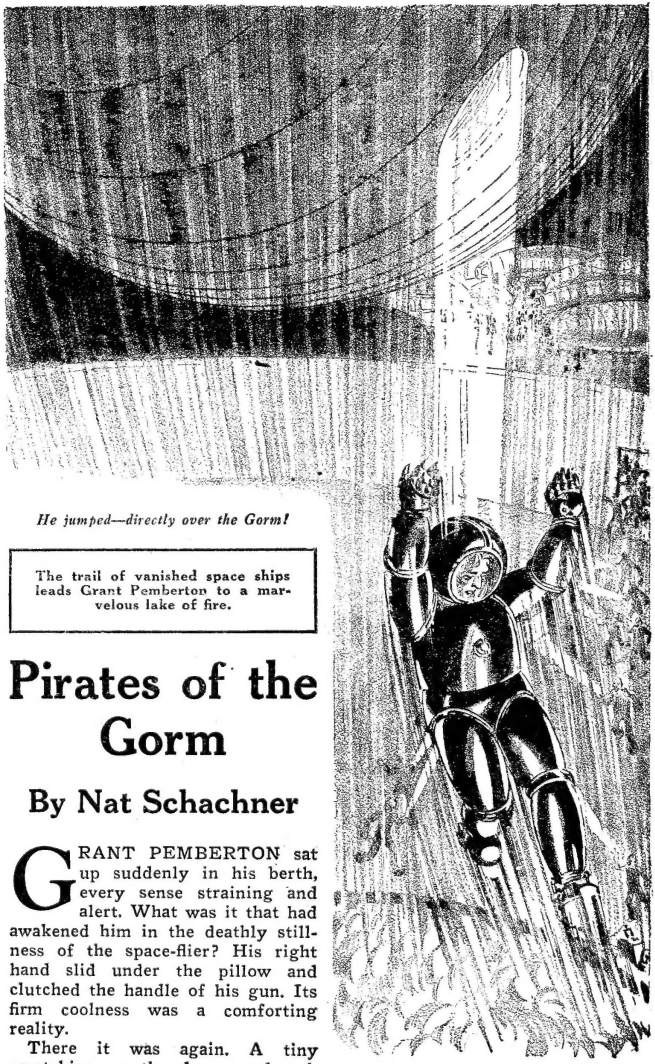


He jumped—directly over the Gorm!

The trail of vanished space ships leads Grant Pemberton to a marvelous lake of fire.

Pirates of the Gorm

By Nat Schachner

GRANT PEMBERTON sat up suddenly in his berth, every sense straining and alert. What was it that had awakened him in the deathly stillness of the space-flier? His right hand slid under the pillow and clutched the handle of his gun. Its firm coolness was a comforting reality.

There it was again. A tiny scratching on the door as though

someone was fumbling for the slide-switch. Very quietly he sat, waiting, his finger poised against the trigger. Suddenly the scratching ceased, and the panel moved slowly open. A thin oblong patch glimmered in the light of the corridor beyond. Grant tensed grimly.

A hand moved slowly around the slit—a hand that held a pencil-ray. Even in the dim illumination, Grant noted the queer spatulate fingers. A Ganymedan! In the entire solar system only they had those strange appendages.

Pemberton catapulted out of his berth like a flash. Not a moment too soon, either. A pale blue beam slithered across the blackness, impinged upon the pillow where his head had lain only a moment before. The air-cushion disintegrated into smoldering dust. Grant's weapon spat viciously. A hail of tiny bullets rattled against the panel, and exploded, each in a puffball of flame.

But it was too late. Already the unknown enemy was running swiftly down the corridor, the sucking patter of his feet giving more evidence of his Ganymedan origin. Pemberton sprang to the door, thrust it open just in time to see a dark shape disappearing around a bend in the corridor. There was no use of pursuit; the passageway ended in a spray of smaller corridors, from which ambush would be absurdly easy.

HE glanced swiftly around. The corridor was empty, silent in the dim, diffused light. The motley passengers were all sound asleep; no one had been disturbed by the fracas. Earthmen, green-faced Martians, fish-scaled Venusians, spatulate Ganymedans and homeward-bound Callistans, all reposing through the sleep-period in anticipation of an early landing in Callisto.

All were asleep, that is, but one. That brought Pemberton back to the problem of his mysterious assailant. Why had this Ganymedan tried to whiff him out of existence? Grant frowned. No one on board knew of his mission, not even the captain. On the passenger list he was merely Dirk Halliday, an inconspicuous commercial traveler for Interspace Products. Yet someone had manifestly penetrated his disguise and was eager to remove him from the path of whatever deviltry was up. Who?

Grant gave a little start, then swore softly. Of course! Why hadn't he thought of it before! The scene came back to him, complete in every detail, as though he were once more back on Earth, in the small, simply furnished office of the Interplanetary Secret Service.

The Chief of the Service was glancing up at him keenly. Beside him was a tall, powerfully shouldered Ganymedan, Miro, Inspector for Ganymede. Grant looked at him with a faint distaste as he sat there, drumming on the arm of his chair with his spatulate fingers, his soft suction padded hoofs curled queerly under the seat. There was something furtive, too, about the red lidless eyes that shifted with quick unwinking movements.

BUT then, Pemberton had small use for the entire tribe of Ganymedans. Damned pirates, that's all they were. It was not many years back since they had been the scourge of the solar system, harrying spatial commerce with their swift piratical fliers, burning and slaying for the mere lust of it.

That is, until an armada of Earth space-fliers had broken their power in one great battle. The stricken corsairs were compelled to disgorge their accumulations of plunder, give up all their fliers and armament, and above all, the im-

port of metals was forbidden them. For, strangely enough, none of the metallic elements was to be found on Ganymede. All their weapons, all their ships, were forged of metals from the other planets.

It was now five years since Ganymede had been admitted once again to the Planetary League, after suitable declarations of repentance. But the prohibitions still held. And Grant placed small faith in the sincerity of the repentance.

The Chief was speaking.

"We've called you in—Miro and I," he said, in his usual swift, staccato manner, "because we've agreed that you are the best man in the Service to handle the mission we have in mind."

Grant said nothing.

"It's a particularly dangerous affair," the Chief continued. "Five great space-fliers, traveling along regular traffic routes, have all vanished within the space of a month—passengers, crews and all. Not a trace of them can be found."

"No radio reports, sir?"

"That's the most curious part of the whole business. Everyone of the fliers was equipped with apparatus that could have raised the entire solar system with a call for help, and yet not the tiniest whisper was heard."

THE Chief got up and paced the floor agitatedly. It was plain that this business was worrying him. Miro continued to sit calmly, seemingly indifferent. "It's uncanny, I tell you. Gone as though empty space had swallowed them up."

"You've applied routine methods, of course," Grant ventured.

"Of course," the Chief waved it aside impatiently. "But we can't discover a thing. Battle fliers have patrolled the area without success. The last ship was literally snatched away right under the nose of a convoy. One minute it was in radio communication, and the next—whiff—it was gone."

"Where is this area you mention?" Already Pemberton's razor-edged brain was at work on the problem.

"Within a radius of five million miles from Jupiter. We've naturally considered placing an embargo upon that territory, but that would mean cutting off all of the satellites from the rest of the system."

Miro stirred. His smooth slurred voice rolled out.

"And my planet would suffer, my friend. Alas, it has already suffered too much." He evoked a sigh from somewhere in the depths of his barrel chest, and tried to cast up his small red eyes.

Grant suffered too, a faint disgust. Damn his eyes, what business had an erstwhile pirate, not too recently reformed, being self-righteous?

"Miro thinks," the Chief continued unheeding, "that the Callistans know more about this than they admit. He has a theory that Callisto is somehow gathering up these ships to use in a surprise attack against his own planet, Ganymede. He says Callisto has always hated them."

"Damn good reason," Grant said laconically.

MIRO'S lidless eyes flamed into sudden life. "And what do you mean by that, my friend?"

Pemberton replied calmly. "Simply that your people have harried and ravaged them for untold centuries. They were your nearest prey, you know."

Miro sprang to his feet, his soft suction pads gripping the floor as though preparatory to a spring. Gone was the sanctimonious unction of his former behavior; the ruthless savage glared out of the red eyes, the flattened fingers were twisting and curling.

"You beastly Earthling," he cried in a voice choked with rage, "I'll—"

The Chief intervened swiftly. "Here, none of that," he said sharply to Miro. "Don't say anything you'll regret later." Then he turned to Grant, who was steadily holding his ground: "There was no reason, Pemberton, to insult an inspector of the Service. Consider yourself reprimanded." But the edge of the rebuke was taken off by the slight twinkle in the Chief's eye.

Somehow a truce was patched up. Grant was to ship as an ordinary passenger on the *Althea*, the great passenger liner that plied between Callisto and the Earth. It was not his duty to prevent the disappearance of the vessel, the Chief insisted, but to endeavor to discover the cause. It was up to Grant then to escape, if he could, and to report to Miro on Ganymede immediately with his findings. Miro was leaving by his private Service flier at once for Ganymede, to await him. Grant thought he saw a faint sardonic gleam in the Inspector's eyes at that, but paid no particular heed to it at the time.

NOW, as Grant stood in the corridor of the great space-flier, listening intently for further sounds from his hidden foe, it flashed on him. Miro knew he was on board. It was a Ganymedan who had treacherously attacked him. The puzzle was slowly fitting its pieces together. But the major piece still eluded him. What would happen to the ship?

As he turned to go back to his room, a ripping, tearing, grinding sound came to his startled ears. It was followed by a sudden swishing noise. Grant knew what that meant. A meteor had ripped into the vitals of the space-flier, and the precious air was rushing through the fissure into outer space. He whirled without an instant's hesitation and sprang down the long corridor toward the captain's quarters. If caught in time, the hole could be plugged.

Even as he ran, there was another grinding smash, then another, and another. Good Lord, they must have headed right into a meteor shower. Panels were sliding open, and people, scantily attired, thrust startled heads out into the corridor. Someone called after him, but he did not heed or stop his headlong race. He must get to the control room at once.

Already the air in the corridor was a sucking whirlpool that beat and eddied about him in its mad rush to escape. It sounded like the drumbeat of unsilenced exploders. A meteor shower of unprecedented proportions! In the back of Grant's mind as he ran, hammered a thought. Every swarm of meteors in the solar system was carefully plotted. The lanes of travel were routed to avoid them. There was no known shower in this particular area!

He collided violently with a strange ungainly figure. In his desperate haste he did not give much heed, but tried to push his way past. The figure turned on him, and then Grant stopped short, an exclamation frozen to his lips. Red unwinking eyes stared out at him from goggles set in a helmet. The body was completely inclosed in lusterless creatoid. It was a Ganymedan in a space-suit!

GRANT saw the quick movement of the other toward an open side flap. He did not hesitate an instant. His fist shot out and caught the Ganymedan flush in the throat, while his left hand simultaneously seized the creatoid-covered arm that gripped a pencil-ray. The helmeted head went back with a sickening thud. But the Ganymedan was a

powerful brute. Even as he staggered back from the force of the blow, vainly trying to release the pencil-ray for action, his right foot jerked forward. The next moment both were rolling on the floor, twisting and heaving in silent combat. Frightened passengers rushed down the corridor, screaming with terror, half carried along by the hurricane wind, clambering over the combatants in an insane desire to get away, where, they knew not; and still neither relaxed his grip, seeking a mortal hold.

Pemberton was certain that his silent unknown foe held the clue to the mystery he was trying to fathom. He fought on, silently, grimly. The cold creatoid fabric was slippery, but a sudden jerk of an arm, a certain quick twist that Grant was familiar with, and his enemy went limp. Grant's breath was coming in quick, labored gasps. There was very little air left now. But he did not care. He tugged at the fastenings on the helmet. He must see who his captive was, wrest from him the heart of the mystery.

There came a clatter of feet behind him, a sudden rush of space-suited figures that overwhelmed and passed over him with trampling strides. He was torn loose from his prey, rolled over and over, gasping for air. When he staggered to his feet again, bruised and shaken, the corridor was swept clean of figures. His assailants had carried his opponent away with them.

A wild surge of anger swept through him. More Ganymedans, these rescuers, all accoutered for airless space. They had been carefully prepared for this. Heedless of all else, he swayed groggily after them, intent only on joining battle once again. The illumination was dim now, the cries of fear that had rung through the ship were gone; only a deathly silence reigned now. His lungs were bursting for want of air; even the whirlwind had died down for lack of fuel. But still he kept on, like a bloodhound on the trail.

HE rounded a corner. A slight figure, swaying like a reed, collided with him and would have fallen if he had not thrust out a supporting arm. It was a girl. Even in the shadowy light he saw that she was beautiful. Her delicately molded features were drained white, but her deep pooled eyes were level in their gaze, unafraid.

"I'm sorry," he managed, finding utterance labored, "Are you hurt?"

"Quite all right," she said, with a wan smile, "if only I had some air to breathe."

The essential bravery of her touched him. He forgot all about the escaped Ganymedans.

"We'll have to try some other portion of the ship. Maybe some of the bulkheads are uninjured."

She shook her head. "I just saw the captain," she enunciated faintly. "Every bulkhead is riddled. Said—I—should get space-suit—in stateroom—though no use—doomed. Something wrong — wireless — not working. . . ." Her voice trailed. She had fainted.

Grant caught up her slight form and lurched unsteadily into the nearest cabin. The blood was roaring in his ears now, his heart was pumping madly, but he forced himself on. His eyes strained toward the compartment where the emergency space-suit was neatly compacted. Thank God. It was still there. The inmate had evidently rushed out at the first alarm to join the terror-maddened crush.

Pemberton worked with feverish haste. Somehow he thrust the unconscious girl into the suit, tightened the helmet into position, opened the valve that started the steady measured flow of life-giving

oxygen. Then, with dark spots dancing before his eyes, he deposited her gently on the floor, and managed to force himself in the now almost total darkness toward another room.

HIS swelling hands fumbled. The compartment was empty. Despairing, conscious only of a desire to lie down, to rest, he tried another. It, too, was empty. He stumbled over sprawled bodies, fell, managed to get up again. Again he fumbled into a compartment. The clammy feel of the creatoid never was more welcome. His breath was coming in whistling gasps. It seemed ages of strangulation before the first cool rush of oxygen expanded his tortured lungs. For a full minute he stood there, inhaling deep draughts. Then once more he was himself, his brain functioning with keen clarity.

He must find the Ganymedans and come to grips with them. There was no doubt in his mind that somehow they had been responsible for the cataclysm. Just how, he did not know, but he would find out.

But the girl. He could not leave her. Duty and something else stirred into conflict. He hesitated. In the flap of the suit was an emergency flash. Throwing the beam on the walls and flooring, he managed to retrace his steps to the cabin where he had left her. As he flashed it inside, his heart gave a great bound. She was standing now.

"Feel all right?" he spoke into the tiny transmitter that was part of the regulation equipment.

"Fine." Her warm, rich voice spoke in his ear. "But I'm not thinking of myself. Are the others on board safe? What happened?"

"I'm afraid we are the only ones alive," he told her gravely. "As to what happened, I can only guess. We seem to have hit an unusually heavy meteor shower that riddled us through and through, though—" He paused.

"Though what?"

He ignored her question. "The first thing we've got to do is find out where we are." His flash sought the window switch and found it. He went over and pressed it. A section of the beryllium-steel casing slid smoothly open, disclosing a thick flawless quartzite port. He stared out at the dark pattern of space. Long he gazed, then a stifled exclamation reached the girl.

"What is it?" she cried.

"Come and look," he told her gravely, and made room for her.

AT first she saw only the unwinking stars of space. Then her eyes shifted forward. Jupiter lay ahead, a vast cloud-girt disk. It was ominously near. Somehow it gave the effect of rushing straight at her.

Right along the equator floated, or seemed to float, a huge red oval —the Great Red Spot of Jupiter. She had heard of it before. But what caught her immediate attention was a tiny flare of intense illumination, right in the very heart of the Spot. Bright orange it was, tinged with yellow, dazzling even at this distance. She watched it eagerly. Then she gave a sudden start.

"You've seen it." Grant's voice sounded quietly in her helmet.

"Yes. Why, it—it pulsates!"

"Exactly. Now look along the hull of the ship."

She did so, and gasped again. The steel-shod sides were bathed in an unearthly orange glow.

"Why, that must be the light from the orange spot down there."

Grant nodded. "Yes, and more than that. They are power waves of a nature that we've known nothing of before. We are being pulled down along that beam straight for

Jupiter, straight for the source of that light!"

"But that means there are intelligent beings on Jupiter."

"No doubt."

"But—but everyone knows that there's no life on Jupiter. It's a frozen waste swathed in impenetrable whirlwind clouds."

"How does everyone know?" Grant retorted. "Has anyone ever penetrated through those clouds?"

"No," she admitted; "though there have been plenty of expeditions that tried, and never came back."

"That of course doesn't prove anything. Mind you," he added, "I didn't say there was native life existing on Jupiter. I merely said there were intelligent beings operating that illumination."

"Who could it be then?"

"We'll find out when we get down there."

THE very calmness of his matter-of-fact statement brought her back abruptly to their precarious situation.

"But, great heavens, we'll smash and be killed. Can't we do something?"

"We'll not smash," Grant said positively. "Though very likely we shall be killed. As for doing something, we can only wait and take our chances, if the gentry who are hauling us in will only give us an opportunity. You know," he added with a fine inconsecutiveness, "I don't even know your name."

She bubbled with sudden laughter. "Nona—Nona Gail. I was on my way to Callisto, to meet my father," she explained. "He's an engineer, doing some construction work for Interspace Products. But now that I've told you all, what and who may you be?"

He was frank. There was now no need for concealment. "Grant Pemberton, an unimportant unit of the Interplanetary Secret Service."

"Then you knew that the trip would be dangerous," she challenged.

"Yes."

"Why did you come?"

"It is part of my duties."

There was silence between them. He turned to stare out of the quartz port-hole again. Jupiter was perceptibly nearer; an enormous convex globe that blotted out half the heavens. They were being drawn at a frightful velocity toward the mysterious pulsating point, now blinding in its brilliance.

They both saw it simultaneously: a space-suited figure, far out in the depths of interstellar space, caught up in a sudden flare of orange illumination. The strange figure seemed to whirl around, straighten up, and shoot at breakneck speed headlong for Jupiter. Behind it, and in a direct line with the winking flame in the Great Spot, another space denizen glowed luridly, startlingly, out of the blackness beyond, whirled, and shot down the long invisible path.

Nona cried out: "Grant, tell me quickly, what are they; what is pulling them?"

Even as she spoke, more and more figures were blazoned in the orange ray, until a long file of beings were catapulting in a single straight line past the space-ship, outdistancing it until they became faint specks in the distance.

PEMBERTON'S hand was upon her shoulder, his eyes literally blazing through the goggles, while his voice shouted in her ears. "Come with me; we haven't a second to lose."

"B-but," she gasped, "you haven't told me—"

"No time," he interrupted, and, shoving her in front of him, he rushed her through corridor after

corridor until they came to the air-lock of the liner.

"If only we have time," he groaned, and cursed himself for a bungling fool for not having surmised the maneuver earlier.

Just as he had expected, the great lock was open. The ship was as silent as the grave. There was no air anywhere, only the unutterably cold airlessness of space. Without pausing in his headlong rush, he pushed the bewildered girl through the open port, out into the overwhelming, intangible blackness. Nona's smothered cry of fear came to him as the next instant he stepped forward and left the solid footing to float in sudden weightlessness in a vast sea of nothingness.

The girl reached out and caught his arm convulsively. Even through the fabric of their suits he could feel her trembling. Pemberton had taken good care to retain a hold on the edge of the open air-lock. The two swung unsteadily.

"What is the reason for this?" Grant sensed, rather than heard, the tremor in her voice. She was making a desperate effort to control herself. "We'll be lost—out here in space."

"Don't worry," he said soothingly. "I'll explain in due course. In the meantime you'll have to trust me. Did you see where that invisible ray held when it illumined the last Ganymedan?"

"Ganymedan?" she echoed in surprise. "What makes you think—"

"Never mind that. Did you?" he insisted.

"Yes," she admitted, "it was about over there." She indicated the spot with an outthrust arm. "About a hundred yards, I should judge."

"Exactly," he agreed. "Well, young lady, our lives, and far more, depend upon our reaching that exact line in space immediately."

"I don't know what you are talking about, but even so, how can we make it? I'm not a rocket."

"It's difficult, I admit, but we must. Now hold on tight to my arm, and press your feet firmly against the wall of the ship." She obeyed.

"Now when I count three, shove off violently, and pray that we're going straight. Are you game?"

She stiffened; then, very slowly, "All right; start counting."

"Good girl," Grant said approvingly. "One—two—th-r-ee-ee!"

They flexed their legs in perfect unison, and shoved off.

OUT into the blackness of space they shot, lost to all sense of motion; yet the hull of the space-flier, dimly gleaming in the thin light of the far off sun, retreated from them with terrifying swiftness.

They were alone in space! It was an uncanny, a horribly helpless sensation. All about them was infinity, a vast void out of which peered at them the cold, unwinking stars. They were like swimmers in mid-ocean, without even the buoyant feel of the salt water to comfort them.

Nona's grip on Grant's arm was agonizing in its intensity.

"Scared?" Grant queried.

"A—a little," she admitted; "but don't bother about me. I'm all right."

She could be depended upon to keep up her end, Grant thought admiringly.

On and on they floated in the welter of space. And still there was no ray, nothing but unrelieved blackness. Pemberton was somewhat worried. Had the saving ray been quenched at the source? Were they too late? If so, they were doomed to a frightful obliterating fall to the surface of the planet, or worse still, they were destined to swing endlessly in space. Already

the liner was far away, out of their grasp, even had they desired to return.

His breath was coming in quick gasps now. "Scared?" he once more asked the silent figure beside him.

"Frightfully—but carry on. We'll get there, wherever it is."

Her gay determination strengthened him wonderfully. On and on they floated.

Suddenly the dim, dark bulk of the girl caught the uncanny orange light. The next instant the creatoid fabric of his own suit caught it, too.

"Thank God," he cried joyously. "It's still on. Just relax, Nona, the ray will take care of us now."

He felt a powerful tug at his body, he was whirled completely around, and then there was a steady pull. He was being catapulted down the ray to the mysterious point of brilliance in the Great Red Spot. The girl was right beside him. The space-liner was passed with a smooth rush, and soon receded to a dwindling speck.

"NOW will you explain?" asked Nona impatiently, after she had caught her breath in sudden relief.

Grant stretched luxuriously before he began.

"Certainly. There's nothing for us now to do but wait until we get pulled down to Jupiter, and that'll take some time. I hope we look like Ganymedans."

"Will you get on with your story!" she cried.

He obeyed. He started from the beginning and went right up to the time when he had so rudely thrust her out into space.

"You see," he explained, "I had put the puzzle together a bit, but there were still pieces missing. For instance, those chaps down there know that every space-liner is equipped with emergency space-suits. Why pull the ship down with live men on board? That would naturally mean a fight, and we have no mean weapons, what with disintegrator ray-projectors and explosive electro-bullets. Then again, for some reason, there were Ganymedans on board. They would very likely be whiffed out in the mêlée. The ship might be destroyed also, and they evidently are very careful about getting the ship down intact. The little meteor holes can easily be plugged up, and the liner made as good as new. At least that was my guess.

"I was trying to puzzle it out, rather hopelessly," he continued, "when I saw the ray out in space pick up those floating figures. That was the last little piece in the jigsaw.

"The Ganymedans evidently had to leave the ship because, as it approaches the planet, something will be done to kill off any unfortunates who are still alive, waiting their chance to fight the invisible enemy. Possibly a penetrating lethal gas that will be forced into the interior. So they evolved the ray to carry the Ganymedan passengers down gently, safely. And we are stowaways," he concluded grimly.

Nona had listened intently to the long recital.

"But why," she expostulated, "was it necessary to have their own people on board? The meteors that riddled the ship were projectiles shot from their station on Jupiter. So was the attraction-ray that pulls the ship down."

"Because they required a sufficient force to disable the radio apparatus. All radio waves used on interplanetary liners are shielded from interference. It is impossible to blank them out. And with the radio intact, every battle flier in space would be on their trail in a hurry."

SEVERAL hours passed, and still they fell endlessly through space, unaware of their motion except that Jupiter was now a huge orb blotting out the universe. The grim face of the giant planet was enswathed in endless billowing clouds. No one had ever penetrated to the real core. But what held their eager, straining attention was a vast blood red disk, cyclonic in character, directly beneath them. The Great Red Spot! And immediately in the center of it was the tiny, blindingly brilliant yellow-orange oval, winking up at them with quick, steady pulsations.

"What can it be?" Nona wondered.

"The source of their power, evidently. But what interests me more just now is where the Ganymedans have their hangout in those clouds, and what they're doing with the ships they capture."

Jupiter was now a flat level stretch that reached on all sides as far as the eye could see. Grant felt a sudden sensation of weight again, as though something was pressing with crushing force against his chest.

"Hello," he said, "our fall is being checked. They're making sure their friends come to no harm." And he laughed bitterly, thinking of the men and women lying with lungs ruptured, cold and stiff, in the interior of the *Althea;* of the possible few wretches who had managed to huddle into space-suits, ignorant of the deadly gas that was soon to search out their seemingly impenetrable habiliments.

Slowly, ever more slowly, they fell. Thin wisps of reddish vapor rushed upward toward them, and then they were enveloped in vast swirls of cloud masses. They were within the Great Spot!

Then the lurid clouds parted suddenly, revealing a deep hole, at the bottom of which flamed and flared the mysterious yellow-orange brilliance. Down the long shaft they fell, while all around its invisible walls dark red cyclones stormed and beat in vain.

JUST as it seemed as if they were doomed to fall headlong into the blaze, they were swerved violently into an opening that angled off from the main shaft. Down this branching shaft they continued to fall—interminably—when suddenly it widened, and they were dropping through the interior of a great dome, of which the arched roof was the swirling clouds they had just penetrated. Directly beneath floated a flat island of smooth rock, supported and upheld by a shining sea of vapors.

The girl exclaimed sharply, but Grant only nodded to himself with grim satisfaction. He had expected something like this. For, clustered in serried rows at the end of the island directly beneath them were sleek, stream-lined grayhounds of the interplanetary traffic lanes, now resting immovably on the smooth gray stone—the missing space-liners!

The island was bisected by a huge forbidding wall, over which, at their angle, Grant was unable to see.

The ground was encumbered too with clumps of intricate machinery, all of the same polished gray stone; Ganymedan stone, Ganymedan machinery, Pemberton recognized at once. Hundreds of figures were scurrying awkwardly around, clad in the inevitable space-suit. Several were working desperately at a huge concave glass reflector. Others were pointing a stone nozzle, extending out of a pit, directly upward.

"I'm afraid," Nona shuddered and pressed closer to Grant.

"Don't be," he assured her. "Just

say nothing when we land. Let me do the talking."

All this while they had been floating gently downward toward what they now saw to be a miniature replica of the vaster orange brightness at the bottom of the main shaft from which they had been diverted. It was a pool of liquid fire, so intense in its brilliance that their eyes were dazzled staring at it. It rose and fell in regular pulsations. They were not far above it now, and still no one on the strange island seemed to be aware of their coming.

Nona cried out. "Grant, we're going to fall right into it!"

Pemberton looked down at the small fiery pool with anxious eyes. Unless something happened, and that quickly, they would be seared to a crisp. Already the heat was uncomfortable, even through their suits. He tried to kick himself aside, but the pull of the liquid was too powerful for him. Then he resolved on a desperate expedient.

"Say, you fellows down there," he cried in the smooth, slurred Ganymedan speech. "What are you trying to do, fry us? Hurry up and prepare our landing."

FOR a moment they were tense with the tenseness of imminent death. Were the Ganymedans equipped with communication disks; would they sense the strangeness of the accent? Nona was gripping his hand with a pressure that penetrated the fabric. And every second brought them down closer and closer to the dread lake.

"Ah!" Nona's breath came in a shuddering sigh. For one of the figures glanced upward and saw them dropping. He shouted something to his fellows, and darted for a lever set in the stone next to the pool. He threw it over swiftly. Immediately what seemed to be a smooth slab of transparent glassite shot into position over the pulsating flame, not an instant too soon, either, for it had barely covered the flaming death when the Earthlings' feet were already touching it.

"It would have served you two fools right if I had let you drop in," their savior grumbled disgustedly. "What in Jupiter took you so long? Everyone else arrived hours ago. Didn't know there were any more."

"Sorry, but we couldn't help it," Grant responded carefully. "You see, we got mixed up in a scrap with some Earthmen who evidently suspected us, just as we were diving out of the air-lock. We had the devil's own job of beating them off."

"You too! The Chief came down foaming at the mouth. Some dumb Earthman almost throttled him before he got away. He swears he'll blast Earth out of space. He's that mad. But here, I've got no time to be talking to your fellows. I've got work to do. Better report to the Chief at once, and heaven help you. He's sure in a black rage at this minute."

With that he moved away, over to the gang of Ganymedans holding the stone nozzle and looking expectantly up at the large, round hole in the cloud ceiling.

Nona stood close to Grant. "What are they doing with the queer affair?" She indicated the nozzle.

"I'm afraid we'll find out only too soon," he answered grimly. "Look—" he broke off.

Far overhead, through the great round orifice, darted a tremendous shape, pointed, glittering.

"Why, that's the *Althea*," Nona exclaimed.

"Yes. Now watch. Damn—all we can do is watch," Grant gritted between his teeth.

DOWN sped the gleaming liner, pride of the fleet. The men at the mirror were swerving it on gimbals until a ray from it flashed on the burnished nose. As though it were a physical impact, the vessel slackened its tremendous speed and hung suspended midway between the cloud concavity and the island.

The men with the nozzle spurred into activity. A thin stream of fluid shot out of the orifice straight up for the captive liner. The tip of the expanding spray impinged on the hull—and Nona gasped her astonishment. For the liquid passed clean through the hull as though it were a porous network instead of four-inch thick beryllium-steel.

"Just as I thought," Grant groaned. "Lethal gas that penetrates everything. Those poor people on board—for their own sakes I hope none remained alive to hit this."

"Can't we do anything?" Nona asked desperately.

"Nothing for the *Althea*. But plenty to prevent any more disasters like it." There was a hard ring to his voice. "Come on." He stepped off the transparent slab onto the stone floor of the island.

"Where to?" asked Nona, following.

"We're going to locate that orange oval we saw from the *Althea*. That's the secret of all this. The pool of liquid fire here is unimportant, secondary."

They were at one edge of the floating island. The other side was hidden from them by the solid wall that stretched across its full diameter.

"We'll scout beyond there," Grant pointed out. "I'll miss my guess if what we're looking for is not on the other side."

As they started for the wall, they saw the *Althea* brought slowly down to the rock, another captive to swell the motionless fleet. It did not take them long to reach the barrier. Some fifty feet high it was, of smooth polished Ganymedan stone, and no door or opening in its straight unbroken surface.

"How shall we get through?" Nona asked.

Grant surveyed it thoughtfully.

"There must be a hidden spring somewhere," he said.

He walked carelessly along the wall, tapping it idly here and there. His quick probing fingers were searching.

With a sharp "Ah!" he stopped short. He bent over a moment; his fingers moved deftly. Then he straightened with a grunt of satisfaction. A section of the seemingly solid, immovable stone was sliding silently open. He looked through.

NONA saw him jerk his head back, heard his involuntary cry of horror. Then she heard another cry; an excited warning shout. She whirled around in time to see a Ganymedan running toward them from behind. A deadly pencil-ray pointed straight at her companion. Without a moment's hesitation she sprang at Grant, pushed him violently so that he staggered and fell through the opening to the other side. In so doing, she tripped over his body, and fell prone. That saved her life, for a blue flame sheared clean through the stone, inches above her head.

Grant squirmed around underneath. The electro-gun was somehow out of the side flap and now it spat its explosive hail. The tiny bullets flared into little puff balls of flame against the space-suit of the Ganymedan. A long howl of anguish came to them, as he threw up his hands and fell into a shapeless heap. But a moment later

there were other cries, angry shouts. Pemberton was on his feet again with the quickness of a cat. He pulled Nona up after him, thrust her to one side, behind the protection of the wall. His eyes were blazing now, aflame with the ardor of battle. Very carefully he leaned out and pressed the trigger. The surging mob was caught in full flight. The electro-bullets spread fanwise, exploded into flaming deaths. The Ganymedans went down as though a huge scythe had swept through their ranks. The survivors scattered hastily, throwing themselves headlong to the surface of the rock to escape further execution.

"That'll hold them for a while," Grant laughed grimly.

"Drop your gun, and turn around —both of you." A cold, smooth voice spoke in deadly menace directly behind them—a voice that came from the mysterious inner side of the wall.

Grant spun around, his gun ready to fire. A ray snapped out at him, a ray with a greenish tinge. The fingers of his gun hand grew suddenly nerveless; the weapon dropped unresistingly from his paralyzed hand.

A tall Ganymedan towered before him, unhidden by a space-suit. Evidently there was a layer of air in here. The red lidless eyes were filled with a cold fury. Spatulate fingers tensed on the button of a pencil ray.

"Miro," Grant breathed to himself unbelievingly. A great light burst upon him.

THE Inspector of the Service for Ganymede did not recognize him, swathed as Grant was in the depths of his space-suit, nor did he notice the little movement of surprise. He was too furiously angry. His words came tumbling out in a tremble of rage.

"You damned scoundrels; have you gone mad? What do you mean by coming in here through the secret way? Don't you know it is death for anyone to pass the barrier? And what do you mean by shooting down your fellows with an Earth weapon? Answer, damn you, before I thrust you into the Gorm."

Both were silent; Nona because she did not know what to say, and Grant, because he knew his voice would be recognized by Miro's keen ears. He kept his eyes fixed on the Ganymedan, waiting hawk-like for one false move, for the tiniest wavering of attention. But the pencil-ray was pointed squarely at his breast.

"You won't talk?" Miro's voice was choked with passion. "Well, there are ways to make you." With one foot he kicked at the open slab, while his weapon commanded them unwaveringly. There was a smooth soundless rush. Grant knew that the wall was an unbroken surface again. They were cut off on the secret side of the island, alone with Miro.

Yet that was the horror of it. They were *not* alone. For Grant's first darting look inside when he had first opened the panel had shown him the others. Hundreds of them there were, men of all races and planets, a motley crew. And each man walked stiffly, unnaturally, looking neither to the right nor to the left. Their eyes were fixed and glassy; the skin of their faces, no matter what their origin, was uniformly parched and gray. A cold sweat broke out on Grant's forehead. They looked like automatons; beings from whom life had been drained. He heard a little choked cry from Nona; she had seen them, too.

Miro plucked out with his free hand a little pear-shaped mechanism punctured with innumerable holes.

He blew into it, once—twice. It gave forth a high whining note. Instantly two of the strange lifeless men wheeled angularly, and with queer mechanical movements headed straight for them. A bloodless hand stretched out, grasped Nona. Grant heard her scream and saw her struggling in a loathsome grip.

FORGETTING everything, forgetting the deadly ray in Miro's hands, he sprang to her rescue. The next instant he was in the grip of a similar hand, a frail, dead-white naked arm, yet endowed with the strength of steel. Struggle as he might, dash his fist as hard as he could against the unresisting blank face, he could not loose that grip. Miro watched his futile strugglings mockingly.

"Take these traitors over to the Gorm and let me look at their faces," he ordered.

Grant and Nona were picked up in those emaciated, powerful arms as easily as though they were children, and the unhuman creatures proceeded at a slow, awkward pace away from the hall, toward the outer edge of the island. From his uncomfortable vantage point, Pemberton noticed that they were passing clumps of intricate stone machinery. Dead-faced automatons, similar to their captors, were tending the whirring machinery with ordered, stiff-legged movements.

Then, straight ahead, Grant saw the edge of the island, against which beat and billowed in furious, gigantic heaves, the reddish overarching clouds of the Great Spot. Strangely enough, though they whirled and eddied, they could not seem to break through the invisible barrier. And then the lake of fire sprang into view—the mysterious place of flame they had seen from afar, that had pulled the hapless *Althea* out of its course down to destruction on Jupiter. This then was the Gorm!

A wide circular pool it was, of an unearthly yellow-orange brilliance. The midday sun was no more dazzling to the eye. Out it stretched from the island into the vapors of the Great Red Spot, only touching the stone rim of the island at one thin point. Its liquid fires were waveless now, oily, yet there was something horrible, too, about its smooth quiescence.

Miro whistled. The rigid guards dropped their burdens roughly and stood at attention. One was an Earthman, the other a fish-faced Venusian. Yet the queer dead look of their eyes was exactly the same.

"Will you remove your helmets, or shall I ask the Doora to assist you?" Miro's voice was silky.

BECAUSE there was nothing else to do, Grant unscrewed his helmet and let it fall back on its hinge. Then he looked very calmly and steadily at the Inspector of the Service for Ganymede.

A dull flame leaped into Miro's eyes at the sight of his captive.

"You!" Then he smiled, a peculiarly horrible smile. "You are cleverer than I thought, my Earth friend. You should have been strangled to death on the *Althea,* or made into one of—"

He stopped short, and the smile widened cruelly. "But it is not too late. No, it is not too late."

Grant disregarded his cryptic phrases. He smiled, too, a contemptuous smile that cut like a lash.

"You, Miro, an Inspector of the Service, are only a lying, treacherous, b u t c h e r i n g Ganymedan. Filthy scum of the Universe."

Miro started forward with a roar, a dark flush of rage suffusing his green-tinged countenance. His blunt-edged finger trembled on the button of the pencil-ray. Grant knew he was perilously on the

verge of sudden death, yet his scornful glance did not waver.

It was Nona, hitherto unnoticed, her helmet removed, who darted upon the giant Ganymedan with small beating fists. Miro saw her coming and swung her sprawling away with one sweep of his free hand, while he covered Grant with the other.

He had recovered his composure. Some secret merriment seemed to convulse him.

"Ho! ho!" he shouted. "Who is this little spitfire? By Jupiter, she is a tempting morsel." And his red eyes took in the flushed beauty of the panting girl speculatively.

Grant tensed for a quick spring.

"Stand where you are," Miro barked. "One move and it will be your last." Gone was the smooth unctuous speech of former times. His tone now was cutting, deadly.

"YOU damned Earthmen have been crowing long enough," he said. "When Miro and Ganymede get through with you, the very memory of your filthy planet will have been erased from the solar system." His voice rose higher. "You thought you had us beaten down with your space-battleships and your embargoes on metals. And we were meekly repentant. Oh yes, we were! We took you in nicely. Why, they even made me, Miro, Inspector of your rotten Service.

"But we have been preparing against the day for years. Here on this island that we built we worked, hidden from interference. We are ready now. Our fleets will sail out, in your own ships, to smash the combined space navies of the solar system."

In spite of himself Grant could not hide a sudden grin of relief. The man was mad, to think of pitting a few liners against armored battle craft. Miro saw that grin.

"You think I'm mad, don't you?" he gloated. "Just listen to this, then. We have found a substance that no ray, no electro-bullet can penetrate. Every ship will be coated with it. And the Gorm here"—he pointed to the oily lake—"will draw your proud cruisers down to destruction, or thrust them far out into the uncharted spaces, helpless, just as it pleases us. You wonder how it works? Look! Now it attracts, and powerfully. But when I reverse the current passing through it like this"—he leaned over and pulled a switch set in the rock right by the edge—"it repels, everything. We'll just stand off in space and pick off your proud warships one by one, without a scratch to ourselves. See?" He fairly hissed the last word.

Grant saw, and the cold sweat burst out on his forehead. His brain raced desperately in a vain effort to find some way out, some method of foiling this beast.

"You sure talk big, Miro," he said in bored fashion, feigning indifference; "but it means nothing to me. The point is, what do you intend doing with us?"

THE Ganymedan's lips writhed. "Nothing at all to your pretty friend," he leered. "I have plans for her. But as for you—see these creatures all about?"

"Well?"

"You are going to be one of them. They are passengers and crews who had the misfortune to be alive when the captured ships were sprayed with our gas. It does not kill. Oh, no! It just numbs their faculties, paralyzes them. Then our surgeons get busy. They know how to remove the memory and reasoning areas of the brain and leave just machines, automata, to do our bidding. Clever, aren't they? When Earth is captured, I intend subjecting all your damned

breed to the operation. They make very willing slaves, I've found. Two blasts on this toy"—he raised the whistle to his lips—"and an Earth-Doora comes for you."

Nona sprang forward. "No, no, Miro. Please do not touch Mr. Pemberton. I'll—I'll—"

"What will you?" The Ganymedan's pig-eyes devoured her.

"I'll—" Then, to Grant's eternal horror, she sank into Miro's arms. The surprised look on Miro's face changed slowly to one of passion, as he held her close to him with his great hairy arm.

"Nona!" Grant gasped and saw red. Heedless of the unwavering weapon at his breast, he sprang. Miro snarled as he saw him coming. His finger pressed down. But at that instant the Earth girl struck out with all the power of her slender arm. It was not much of a blow, but it managed to jar the weapon aside. The blue flame leaped hissing through the air.

Miro roared with rage, and flung her yards away, to lie, an unmoving pathetic bundle. Then he swung his ray back into play.

But he never had a chance to use it. All the strength and fury of Grant's lithe, steel sinews and bone were behind the solid smash that landed squarely on the Ganymedan's chin. He went down in a slump, completely out.

GRANT stooped to pick up the fallen pencil-ray, thrust it in the side flap, then hurried over to the limp figure of Nona.

"Darling," he cried, "if anything's happened to you, I'll—"

The still form stirred, sat up.

"Say that again." She was smiling weakly, but happily.

Grant flushed. "As many times later as you'll want," he said, "but now that you're not hurt, we can't waste any time in trying to get out of here."

He walked over to Miro, who was just coming to.

"Listen, you rat," he told the Ganymedan, who was rubbing his chin and groaning: "you do exactly as I say, if you know what's good for you." He shook the pencil-ray significantly.

"You can't get away with it," Miro snarled, muttering a string of curses. There was baffled rage in his red pig-eyes.

Grant surveyed him coldly.

"We'll see about that," he snapped. "Get up." He reinforced his demand with a well-placed kick. The huge Ganymedan came quickly to his feet.

"Walk to the wall," was the next order, "and open the trick door."

With a glance of savage hate, Miro obeyed. Grant followed him with his pistol in readiness. The poor mindless creatures paid no heed to what was going on, but dully continued their appointed tasks.

Pemberton hid himself behind the wall to one side. Nona did likewise, having picked up the electro-gun meanwhile. Only Miro stood before the opening.

"Now tell your cutthroat friends out there we want one of the liners brought directly over the Gorm, you understand. Not the *Althea*, though—that's still full of holes. And only one Ganymedan to guide her over the wall. Be very explicit, and not a false move out of you, or it'll be your last."

With the knowledge that two deadly weapons were pointing squarely at him, Miro shouted unwillingly the necessary instructions to his subordinates outside. Then Grant leaned over and kicked the slide shut.

THERE followed tense moments of waiting. Would the workers beyond obey their leader? Had they become suspicious, and were

even now massing for a surprise attack? Grant had no means of telling.

Then to his ears came the most welcome soft roar of muted rockets. A huge shape swept over the high wall, soared directly over the Gorm, and nestled down in little jets of flame until the stern rested on the solid rock, and the bow swung idly over the brilliant pool.

"Keep your gun trained on this bird," Grant told Nona swiftly. She nodded. The air-lock door on the ship was already sliding open. A Ganymedan, space-suited, was coming through. He saw them, tried to spring back into the shelter of the ship. But a blue ray stabbed out and caught him in mid-flight. There was a spatter of dust, and the hapless creature disintegrated into thin air.

"Sorry I had to do it, but I couldn't afford to let him give the alarm. Now for the dirty work, Nona. You hustle this big bully into the ship, and keep him covered. I'll be right along."

The girl cast him a look of anxiety. "What do you intend doing?"

"Don't worry," he assured her; "I won't get hurt."

After he had seen them within the liner, he got to work. First he brought out from the ship coils of wiring and jumbles of instruments. He took them over to the edge of the Gorm, to the place where he had seen Miro pull the switch, and for the next ten minutes was busy connecting wires, attaching batteries, putting his instruments in place. Then, when he was satisfied that everything was ready, he reversed the switch. The great spaceship, some fifty feet away, was already trembling in every line.

Just as he was rising to sprint for the slowly moving liner, he heard a smooth rushing noise. He whirled. The slide was opening in the wall. A mob of Ganymedans were pouring through. They paused uncertainly a moment, then, as they spied him, there was a concerted rush forward.

Grant acted quickly. Already the space-ship was off the ground, soaring upward. He had not an instant to spare. He dove toward it. The mob yelled, and raced forward to cut him off. His pencil-ray was useless—the distance was too great for its limited range. But then, that applied equally to the weapons of the Ganymedans.

THE blue rays snapped forward at him angrily, but fell short. The ship was moving faster now. It was already several feet off the ground. Grant's heavy space-suit impeded his progress. The charging Ganymedans were dangerously close now. That last beam had missed him by inches. The ship was gathering speed. He was five feet away from the open air-lock when they got the range. A sharp searing pain right across his shoulder. The creatoid material of his suit was cut away as with a knife. A layer of flesh lay exposed. The skin had been whiffed into nothingness.

But that very instant he was leaping off the ground with a mighty effort. The ship was going upward with a rush now. His fingers clawed desperately at the edge of the air-lock. For one breathless instant he clung; then, to his horror, the smooth creatoid covering refused to hold. Slowly he slipped, in spite of every effort, as the surface of the hull refused purchase to his bleeding hands, then down he went with a thud.

A cry of triumph arose from the onrushing Ganymedans as Grant scrambled to his feet, bruised and shaken. He cast a swift, despairing glance upward. The huge liner was a hundred feet up now, gathering speed swiftly. To one side

was the Gorm, a place of dread and menace. The gloating enemy were almost upon him. Even the comfort of a weapon, the grim satisfaction of taking some of his foes to death with him, was denied him. The pencil-ray had been jarred out of his hand by the impact and had doubtless fallen into the Gorm.

Grant felt that he had come to the end of the rope. There was no tremor of fear in him, only regret that he had met the girl and lost her so soon. What would she do, out in space, alone with Miro? No time to think of that now, though. The foremost of the Ganymedans were almost upon him. They intended taking him alive, did they? He braced himself for the attack, ready to go down fighting.

THEN a brilliant plan beat suddenly upon his dazzled mind. It was breath-taking, so simple, yet so desperate did it appear. If it worked—he would win through. If not—but Grant dismissed that thought quickly; one form of death was no worse than another.

Without an instant's hesitation, he whirled and jumped as high as he could—directly over the Gorm! There was a yell of astonishment from the Ganymedans—one had already clutched at his intended victim—as they fell back in horror from the edge. This Earthling was mad to brave the terrors of the Gorm!

But Grant heard nothing. He was instantly conscious of a searing, racking pain that penetrated his every fiber. He forced his eyes upward, anywhere but beneath him. Was his theory correct, or was he destined to drop into the fiery lake. For a single interminable instant, he suffered untold agonies.

Then his body quivered, and he felt an unmistakable push against him. He was moving upward, just as he had hoped. The Gorm was repelling him, even as it had the ship.

Faster and faster he shot up, chasing the liner. Would he catch up with it? He strained his eyes. Exultation flooded through him as he realized that the distance was rapidly lessening between them. The added impetus of his leap over the Gorm had given him the required extra fillip of speed. By now, rays were streaking by him.

Soon he was directly underneath. For an instant he had a quick fear that he might overshoot his mark. But no—he was sliding past the open air-lock. He threw himself sideways and caught at it. This time his fingers held.

As he squirmed and wriggled into the lock, they were already careening into the orange tube through the red swirling clouds. There was no longer any air. Choking, he managed with numbed fingers to screw his helmet on. Then, closing the lock, he proceeded into the ship.

Nona was guarding her prisoner vigilantly. Miro sat there, sullen, defiant. Her glad, welcoming cry filled Grant with a new strange warmth.

"I was so afraid for you when the ship started and you didn't show up," she said, "but I didn't dare leave him alone." She indicated Miro.

"Good girl," he said admiringly. "We'll bind him now, and then I want to show you something."

THEY stood a little later at the bow quartz port-hole. Down the long shaft through which they had risen they saw the glaring flame of the Gorm. As they looked, its regular pulsations turned irregular; it leaped and splashed as though it was a stormy, choppy sea. Then it gave one final mighty heave, and the universe seemed to shatter beneath them. The "walls"

of the shaft collapsed about them and they were enswathed in a raging storm of red clouds.

Nona turned to Grant. "Now, will you explain?"

"Certainly," he grinned boyishly. "I simply reversed the switch that changes the current of the Gorm. I knew that it would then repel the liner out into space, as Miro was incautious enough to inform me.

"Then I figured that if instead of direct current, an alternating flow could be induced, so as to attract and repel in quick succession, enough of a disturbance would be raised in that highly unstable mixture to start fireworks. So I rigged up an automatic break in the circuit, timed it to permit us to get up enough speed from the repulsion to be safely on our way before it would start. The circuit-breaker worked and the alternating current did the rest. That island is wiped out, and so is the Gorm. There'll be no further threat of danger to the solar system from that."

"And Miro, what are we going to do with him?"

"Turn him over to the Service. They'll take care of him. And now, young lady, if you have no further questions, shall I say it again?"

She smiled up at him tenderly, answering:

"If you wish."

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

Two Thousand Miles Below

Beginning a New and Amazing Four-Part Novel of the Unknown Under-Earth

By Charles Willard Diffin

Priestess of the Flame

Another Thrilling Adventure of the Special Patrol

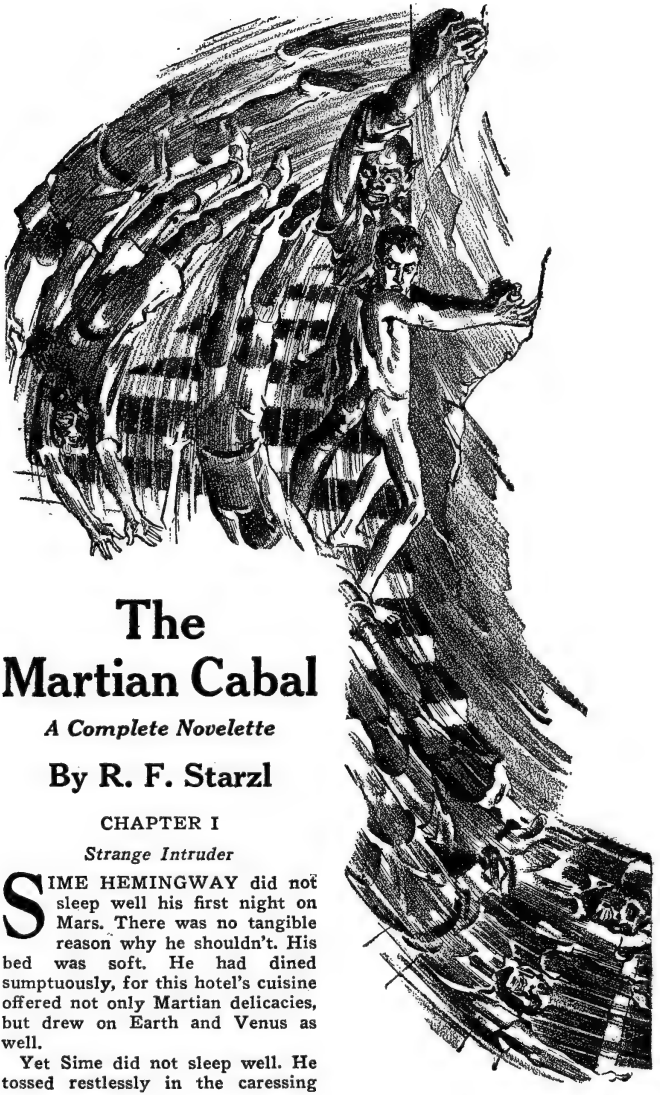
By Sewell Peaslee Wright

The Raid on the Termites

An Absorbing Novelette—Complete—in Which Two Courageous Sub-Sized Men Dare the Mysteries of a Teeming Termitary

By Paul Ernst

—And Others!



The Martian Cabal

A Complete Novelette

By R. F. Starzl

CHAPTER I

Strange Intruder

SIME HEMINGWAY did not sleep well his first night on Mars. There was no tangible reason why he shouldn't. His bed was soft. He had dined sumptuously, for this hotel's cuisine offered not only Martian delicacies, but drew on Earth and Venus as well.

Yet Sime did not sleep well. He tossed restlessly in the caressing

softness of his bed. He turned a knob in the head panel of his bed, tried to yield to the soothing music that seemed to come from nowhere. He turned another knob, watched the marching, playing, whirling of somnolent colors on the domed ceiling of his room.

At last he gave it up. Some sixth sense had him all jumpy. It was not usual for Sime Hemingway to be jumpy. He was one of the coolest heads in the I. F. P., the Interplanetary Flying Police who patrolled the lonely reaches of space and brought man's law to the outermost orbit of the far-flung solar system.

Now he jumped out of bed and examined the fastening of his door, the door to the hotel corridor. There was only one, and it was secure. Windows there were none, and investigation showed that the small ports were all covered with their pivoted safety plates. He extinguished the light, swung aside one of the plates, and peered out into the Martian night. It was moonlight—both Deimos and Phobus were racing across the blue-black sky. The waters of Crystal Canal stretched out before him, seemingly illimitable. Sime knew that the distance to the other side was twenty miles or more. Clear-cut through the thin atmosphere of Mars, he could see the jeweled lights of South Tarog, on the other side.

Sime Hemingway, of the I. F. P., strikes at the insidious interests that are lashing high the war feeling between Earth and Mars.

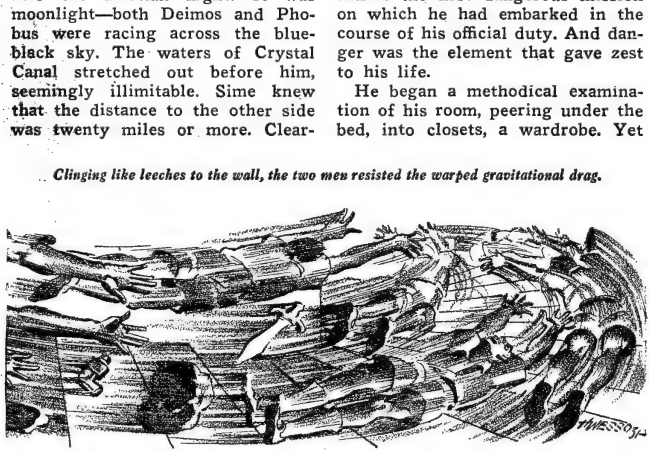
THE hotel grounds, too, were well lighted. Long, luminous tubes, part of the architecture of the buildings, aided the moons, shedding their serene glow on the gentle slope of the red lawns and terraces, the geometrically trimmed shrubs and trees. They were reflected warmly in the dancing waves of the canal, though Sime knew that even in this, the height of the summer season, the outside temperature was very near freezing.

Now a hotel guard came along. He carried at his belt a neuro-pistol, a deadly weapon whose beam would destroy the nervous structure of any living creature. He went past the port with measured stride, and Sime slid back the safety plate with a puzzled frown.

Why was he so nervous? This wasn't the first dangerous mission on which he had embarked in the course of his official duty. And danger was the element that gave zest to his life.

He began a methodical examination of his room, peering under the bed, into closets, a wardrobe. Yet

Clinging like leeches to the wall, the two men resisted the warped gravitational drag.



there was no sign of danger. Carefully he inspected his bed for signs of the deadly black mold from Venus that would, once it found lodgment in the pores of a man's skin, inexorably invade his body and in the space of a few hours reduce him to a black, repulsive parody of humanity. But the sheets were unsullied.

Then his gaze fell on the mist-bath. Travelers who have visited Mars are, of course, familiar with this simple device, used to overcome to some extent the exceeding dryness of the red planet's atmosphere. Resembling the steam bath of the ancients, there was just enough room in the cylindrical case for a man to sit inside while his skin was sprayed with vivifying moisture. But his head would project, and there was no head visible.

Nevertheless, so strong was Sime's intuition, he leveled his neuro-pistol at the cabinet and approached. With a sweep of his muscular arm he swung it open—and gasped!

THE sight that greeted him was enough to make any man gasp, even one less young and impressionable than Sime. In all of his twenty-five years he had not seen a woman so lovely. Her complexion was the delicate coral pink of the Martian colonials—descendants of the original human settlers who had struggled with, and at last bent to their will, this harsh and inhospitable planet. She was little over five feet tall, although the average Martian is perhaps slightly bigger than his terrestrial cousin. Her hair was dark, like that of most Martians, drawn back from her forehead and fastened at the nape of her neck, from there to fall in an abundant, rippling cascade down her slim, straight back. Her figure was like those delicate and ancient creations of Dresden china to be seen in museums, but elastic, and full of strength. She was dressed in the two-piece garment universally worn by both sexes on Mars—a garment, so historians say, that was called "pyjamas" by our forebears.

And she was defiant. In her hand was a stiletto with long, slim blade. Sime made a darting grasp for her wrist and wrung the weapon from her. It fell to the metal floor with a tinkling clatter.

"And now tell me, young lady, what's the meaning of this?"

Suddenly she smiled.

"I came to warn you, Sime Hemingway." She spoke softly and sweetly, and with effortless dignity.

"You came to warn me?"

"You are in grave danger. Your mission here is known, and powerful enemies are preparing to destroy you."

"You talk like you knew something, kid," Sime admitted. "What is my mission here?"

"YOU have been sent to Mars by the I. F. P. in the guise of a mining engineer. You are to discover what you can about a suspected plot of interplanetary financiers to plunge the Earth and Mars into a war."

"How so?" Sime asked enigmatically, concealing his dismay at the girl's ready reply. Here was inside information with a vengeance!

"Several shiploads of gray industrial diamonds from Venus have been seized by war vessels carrying the insignia of the Martian atmospheric guard."

Sime nodded. "Go on!"

"Curiously enough, these raids were so timed that they were witnessed by the news telecasters. All of the people on Earth were thus eye-witnesses, and feeling ran high. Am I right?"

"Go on!"

"And of course you know about the raids on the Martian borium mines by pirates armed with modern weapons. In the fights, some of the pirates' weapons were captured. They bore the ordnance marks of the terrestrial government."

"I'm 'way ahead of you, girlie!" Sime conceded. "Certain financial interests would like to see a war. They're cookin' up these overt acts to get the people all steamed up till they're ready to fight. I'll go further, since you seem to know all about it anyway, and admit that I'm here to find out just who's back of all this. And how does all that tie up with you hiding in my mistbath with a long and mean lookin' knife?"

THE girl dropped her dark lashes in a sidelong glance at the stiletto on the floor. There was a little smile on her lips.

"My usual weapon. Don't you know most of us Martians go armed all the time?"

"Yeh?" Sime grinned skeptically. "And is it a habit of yours to hide in the bedroom of visiting policemen? Come on, kid, I'm going to turn you over to the guard."

For a second it looked as if she would make a dash for the blade glistening there on the floor. But she straightened up, and with a look of infinite scorn said:

"So the mighty policeman of the Sun calls a hotel guard, does he? Please! Believe me, I am myself working for the same object as yourself—the prevention of a horrible war!"

She was pleading now.

"Believe me, you are against forces that you don't understand! I can help you, if you will listen. Let me tell you, the Martian government is itself corrupted. The planetary president, Wilcox, is in alliance with the war party. You will have to fight the police. You will have to fear poison. You will be set upon and killed in the first dark passage. Yet if you help me you may accomplish your object. You *must* help me!"

"What do you want of me?"

"Help me change our government!"

Sime laughed shortly. He began to suspect that this amazing girl was demented. He thought of the powerfully entrenched rulers of this theoretically republican government. For more than two hundred years, if he remembered rightly, the Martians had been ruled by a small group of rich politicians.

"You propose a revolution?" he asked curiously.

"I propose the return of Princess Sira to the throne!" she declared vehemently. "But enough! Are you going to betray me—I, who have risked much to warn you? Or are you going to let me go?"

SIME looked into her warm, earnest little face. Her lips were parted softly, showing perfect little teeth, and she was breathing quickly, anxiously. Sime was woman hungry, as men of the service often are on the long, lonely trail. He seized her quickly, pressed her lithe figure to him and kissed her.

For a thrilling instant it seemed that she relaxed. But she tore away, furious, her eyes cold with anger.

"For that," she panted, raging, "you must die!"

She reached the door before he could stop her, and in a trice she was out in the gallery. He raced after her, staring stupidly. Surprisingly, when her escape was assured, she turned back. Her look was still hurt, angry, as she called to him in low tones:

"Look out for Scar Balta, you brute!"

"Who is Scar Balta?" Sime asked

himself after locking the door again. The name was not unusual and did not bring any familiar associations to his mind. The given name, Scar, once a nickname, had been in general use for centuries. As for Balta—oh, well—

His mind reverted to the girl again. Her warm, palpitant presence disturbed him.

He composed himself to sleep, strapping his dispatch belt around his waist before crawling into bed. He did not believe that the girl had hidden in his room with murderous intent; rather that she had hoped to inspect and perhaps to steal any papers that he carried. But his last conscious thought of her had nothing to do with her connection with this planet of intrigue, but the soft curve of her throat.

CHAPTER II

Scar Balta

SIME breakfasted on one of the juicy Martian tropical pears, and as he dug into the luscious fruit with his spoon he looked about the spacious dining hall, filled with wide-eyed tourists on their first trip to Mars, blissful and oblivious honeymooners, and a sprinkling of local residents and officials.

Through broad windows of thick glass (for on Mars many buildings maintain an atmospheric pressure somewhat higher than the normal outside pressure) could be seen the north banks of the canal, teeming with swift pleasure boats and heavily loaded work barges. Down the long terraces strolled hundreds of people, dressed in garments of vivid colors and sheer materials suitable to the hot and cloudless days. Brilliant insects floated on wide diaphanous wings, waiting to pounce on the opening blossoms.

But the terrestrial agent felt that in this scene of luxury there was a menace. Out of sight, but instantly available, were frightful engines of destruction, waiting to be mobilized against the Earth branch of the human race. And on that distant green planet were people much like these, unconscious still of the butchery into which they were being deftly maneuvered by calculating psychologists, expert war-makers.

His meal completed, Sime sauntered out into the wide, clean streets of North Tarog. He purchased a desert unionall suit, proof against the heat of day and cold of night, and a wide-brimmed Martian pith helmet. Hailing a taxi, he relaxed comfortably in the cushions.

"Nabar mine," he told the driver.

The driver nosed the vehicle up, over the domed roofs of the city and over the harsh desert landscape. The rounded prow cut through the thin air with a faint whistling, and the fair cultivated area along the canal was soon lost to sight.

AFTER half an hour the metal mine sheds grew out of the horizon. But even from a distance of several miles Sime could see that everything was not as it should be. There were no moving white specks of the laborers' white fatigue uniforms against the brown rocks, and no clouds of dust from the borium refuse pile.

The levitator screws of the taxi sank from their high whine to a groan, and the wheels came to the ground before the company office. A man in the Martian army uniform came out. His beetle-browed face was truculent, and his hand rested on the hilt of his neuro-pistol.

"No visitors allowed!" snapped the guard.

"I'm not exactly a visitor," Sime objected, but making no move to get out of the taxi. "I'm an engineer sent here by the board of

directors to see why the output of this mine has dropped. Where's Mr. Murray?"

"All settled!" the guard retorted. "Murray's in jail for mismanagement of planetary resources, and the mine's been expropriated to the government. Now, you—off!"

The driver needed no further order from his fare. The taxi leaped into the air and tore back toward the city. It was clear that the military rules of Mars brooked no nonsense from the civilian population, and that the latter were well aware of it.

"Fast work!" Sime said to himself with grudging admiration. Murray was a trusted agent of the terrestrial government. It was he who had first uncovered the war cabal. Sime knew his face well from the stereoscopic service record—a bald, placid man of about forty, a bona-fide engineer, a spy with an unbroken record of success, until now. And a fighter who asked no odds, who could manage very well on less than an even break. Well, he was up against something now.

They passed the line of shield-ray projectors, North Tarog's first line of defense against an attack of space, hovered over the teeming streets and parks, and settled on the pavement at the Hotel of the Republic. Sime wanted to go to his room and think things over.

FROM the concealment of a doorway an officer with a squad of soldiers came up quickly.

"You are under arrest!" said the officer, placing his hand on Sime's shoulder, while the soldiers rested their hands on their neuro-pistols.

"Would it be asking too much to inquire on what charge?" Sime asked politely.

"Military arrests do not require the filing of charges," the officer explained stiffly. "Come out of there now, Mr. Hemingway."

"I demand to see the terrestrial consul," Sime said, getting out.

"How about my fare?" asked the taxi-driver.

Sime put his hand into his pocket, where he kept a roll of interplanetary script; but the officer restrained him.

"Never mind now," he said ironically. "You are a guest of the government." Then to the driver he added:

"Get on, now! Get on! File your claim at the divisional office."

The driver departed, outwardly meek before the power of the military, and Sime was hustled into an official car. He had little hope that his demand to see the terrestrial consul would be complied with, and this opinion was verified when the car rose into the air and sped over the waters of the canal to South Tarog. It did not pause when it came over the military camps there—the massive ordnance depots in which were stored new and improved killing tools that had long been idle in that irksome interplanetary peace.

They flew on, over the desert, until the Gray Mountains loomed on the horizon. On, over the tumbled rocks, interspersed with the strange red thorny vegetation common in the Martian desert.

Far below them, in a ravine, a cylindrical building was now visible, and toward this the car began to drop. It landed on a level space before the structure. A sliding gate opened, and the car wheeled into a sort of courtyard, protected from the cold of night by an arching roof of glass.

Sime was hustled out and led into an office located on the lower floor of the fortification, or whatever the structure was.

As he saw the man who sat at the desk he gave a startled explanation.

"Colonel Barkins!"

THE elderly, white-haired man smiled. He brushed back his hair with a characteristic gesture, and his twinkling blue eyes bored into those of the I. F. P. special officer. The colonel wore the regular uniform of the service; his little skullcap, with the conventionalized sun symbol denoting his rank, was on the table before him. He put out his lean, strong hand.

"Surprised to see me, eh, Hemingway?" he inquired pleasantly.

Sime managed an awkward salute. "I don't quite understand, sir. You gave me my instructions at the Philadelphia space port just before I made the *Pleadisia*. She's the fastest passenger liner in the solar system; I've barely landed here, and it seems you got here before me. It don't seem right!"

Sime watched the colonel narrowly, a vague suspicion in his mind, and he thought he saw a slight flicker in the man's eye when Sime spoke.

But the colonel answered smoothly, with a hint of reproof:

"Never mind questioning me now, Hemingway. The mission is important. I want to know if you remember every detail of what I told you." He nodded to the men, and they filed out of the room. "Repeat your orders."

"Nothing doing, Colonel!" Sime replied promptly and respectfully. "In fact, Colonel, you can go to hell! This is the first time that a man of the I. F. P. has turned traitor, and if your men hadn't so thoughtfully taken my neuro I'd be pleased to finish you right now!"

"But you observe I have a neuro in my hand," remarked the colonel pleasantly, "and so you will remain standing where you are."

SO saying, he slipped off the white wig he was wearing, wiped his face so that the brown powder came off, and sat, obviously pleased with the success of his masquerade, useless though it was. He was a typical Martian, dark, sleek-haired, coral-skinned.

"I hate to send a man to his death mystified," said the Martian after a moment, "so I'll explain that I am Scar Balta!"

"Scar Balta!"

"You've heard of me?"

"Uh—yes and no." Sime suddenly remembered the girl of the evening before—the imperious little Martian. She had warned him of Scar Balta.

"If I do say it," said the Martian, "I am the best impersonator in the service of the interests I represent. I did not expect to get information of great value from you, but we do not neglect even the most unpromising leads."

He pressed a button; two Martian soldiers answered promptly.

"Take this man to the cell," Balta ordered. "Provide him with writing materials so that he can write a last message to his family. In the morning take him to the end of the ravine and finish him with your short sword."

"Yes, Colonel!"

"The fellow's a colonel, anyway," Sime thought as they led him away.

They led him downward, along a straight corridor that evidently went far beyond the boundaries of the ravine fortress. In places the walls, adequately lit by the glow-wands the guards carried, were plainly cut out of the solid rock; in others they were masonry, as though the channel were passing through pockets of earth; or—the thought electrified him — through faults or natural caverns.

At last they came to the end. One of the guards unlocked a metal door, motioned his prisoner into the prison cell. A light-wand, badly run down and feeble, with only a few active cells left, gave the only light. As the door slammed behind

him, Sime took in the depressing scene.

THE stone walls were mildewed, leprous. The only ventilation was through small holes in the door. Chains, fastened to huge staples in the uneven stone floor, with smooth metal wrist and ankle cuffs, were spaced at regular intervals, and musty piles of canal rushes showed where some forgotten prisoner had dragged out his melancholy last days. Sime was glad they had not chained him down. Probably didn't consider it necessary unless there were many prisoners who might rush the guards.

"Ho, there, sojer!"

The voice was startling, so hearty and natural in this sad place. Sime saw something coming out of a far corner. It was a man in the blouse and trousers of civilian wear; a bald and good-natured man, with a shocking growth of beard.

"Murray's the name," said this apparition with mock ceremony. "And you?"

"I'm Hemingway. Sime Hemingway. Sergeant Sime Hemingway, to be exact. Suppose you'd like to hear my orders?"

"I don't get you," said Murray, shaking hands.

"I mean," Sime explained elaborately, "that I'd like to know if you're Scar Balta, or really Murray, as you say you are."

The other laughed.

"I'm Murray, all right. Feel this scalp. Natural, ain't it? That's one thing Balta won't do—shave off his hair. Too vain. He'd hate to have the Princess Sira see him that way. Ever hear of her? Say, she's a raving beauty. This Balta'd like to be elected planetary president, see—to succeed Wilcox, who has bigger plans. There's always been a strong sentiment for the old monarchy, anyway. The oligarchy never did go big. Follow me?"

"Yeh; go on."

"WELL, this Princess Sira has ideas. She wouldn't mind sitting on the throne again. Her great-great-grandpa was jobbed and murdered, and the nobles who did it formed a closed corporation and called it a republican government. So Sira started holding audiences, and gained a lot of power. Among the people — even among some of the nobles.

"Get the idea? Scar Balta is one of the electors. If he married Sira he'd have the backing of the monarchists, and of course he's done a lot for the bosses. They'd elect him to head off the monarchists, anyway. Then heigh-ho for a war with the Earth, to kill off a lot of the kickers—and soft pickins' in a lot of ways. Neat, huh?"

"Very neat!" Sime assented drily. "But we won't live to see it. Anyway, I won't. They're going to bump me off in the morning."

"As they have a lot of our men," Murray agreed. "But they won't do it in the morning. Or for several days. Look here!"

He held up his hand. On the back of it was what appeared to be a boil.

"But it isn't a boil," Murray explained. "That was done by a stream of water, fine as a needle, under a thousand pounds pressure. They held it there for a minute at a time —I don't know how many times, because I keeled over. Any time I was willing to give them the information they wanted they'd turn it off. Wasn't important info, either. But what is it to them, how much they make me suffer for a trifle?"

Sime couldn't help the lump that rose in his throat. Men like Murray certainly justified the world's faith in the service.

"Listen, old man," Sime said in a low voice, "out in the corridor—"

But Murray squeezed his hand warningly, pulled him to the floor

"Might as well get some sleep," the old man said in ordinary tones. "Plenty cool here. Let's lie together."

He kept his hold on Sime's wrist, and, by alternately squeezing and releasing, began to talk in a silent telegraphic code.

"Don't say anything of importance," he spelled out. "They have mikes in here to pick up all we say. Probably infra-red telenses too, so they can see what we do."

So Sime told him, as they huddled together in simulated sleep, about the walled passages, and they speculated on the possibility of felling the guards and breaking their way to freedom through some underground cavern. But at last they slept soundly to await the tortures of the next morning.

CHAPTER III

The Price of Monarchy

HAD Sime been able to follow and watch the girl he had kissed under such unusual circumstances on the night of his arrival on Mars, he would have been both puzzled and enlightened. After her final warning about Scar Balta she dashed into the luxurious gloom of the passage. At an intersection a maid was awaiting her. She curtseyed as she threw a cape over the girl's shoulder, and together they hurried out into the night.

A magnificently uniformed hotel servant called a private car, drew the vitrine curtains, and saluted as the car lifted sharply into the chilly night air. The car sped across the canal to the jeweled city across the water, to a residence district whose magnificence even the pale night light revealed.

The two women entered a mansion of glittering metal and came to a private apartment.

"Everybody's gone to bed," said the girl, addressing her maid. "That's one thing we can be thankful for."

"Yes, Your Highness. Did you discover anything of importance in the man's room?"

"No. Draw me a bath, Mellie. He—he caught me—and kissed me!"

The maid, with flasks of perfume and aromatic oils in her hand, paused, discreetly impudent.

"You seem not displeased, Your Highness."

"But of that he had no inkling." And Princess Sira laughed. "I left him standing, utterly at a loss. He took me for a common assassin, and yet he wanted to kiss me. That pleased me. But if he had valuable information he kept it. And I promised him death for his kiss."

AS Princess Sira, claimant to the throne of a planet, slipped into the tepid waters of her bath, Mellie stood by, her smooth little Martian's face disturbed. For she loved her mistress, and could not comprehend the things she did under ambition's sway.

"Your Highness, couldn't you let your loyal friends do these dangerous things for you?"

"For what? For fear? And how could a Martian princess who knows fear lay claim to a throne? No, Mellie, one gets used to it. The enemies of the house of Sira are ever alert. Didn't they murder my father and my mother, and my only brother? My peril in this palace is as great as in the room of a terrestrial detective. Only their fear of the people—"

She was interrupted by the tinkling of a bell. The maid left the alcove, and returned a moment later with the news that Jöro, Prince of Hanlon, awaited the princess's pleasure in the ante-room.

"At this hour!" exclaimed the princess. "Did he say what brought him here?"

"Something about a new plot."

"Plots! They fall thicker than rain on Venus. Bid him wait."

Fifteen minutes later, swathed in a trailing orange silk robe that made her look like a Venus orchid, she greeted the prince.

"Greetings, Joro. We seem to have the unusual this night."

The prince, a thin, elderly man of medium stature, smiled admiringly. His sharp features and bright little button eyes gave some hint of the energy which suffused him. Here was a man both ruthless and loyal to his royal house. He addressed her by her given name.

"The hour seems to make no difference with you; Phobus has set, but as long as you are awake there is loveliness enough. I have come, dear one, to tell you that success is ours at last!"

SIRA smiled. "I will restrain my joy, my good Joro, until I hear the price."

"Always the same!" Joro chuckled. "A price, 'tis true, but not too heavy, since you are, in a manner, fond of him."

"I've had vague promises from Wilcox," Sira said with a wry smile. "I would rather trade places with Mellie that be espoused by that madman."

"Not Wilcox, but Scar Balta. He is badly smitten, for which I can not blame him. He has great political power, and the backing of the miltary. He could have dictated better terms, but for love of you has yielded, point after point. He wants nothing now but your hand in marriage, and is prepared to cede to the royal cause all the advantages he has gained—"

"Not to mention," Sira interjected, "the royal prestige he will gain with the common people."

Joro laughed, a little impatiently. "True, true! But after all, what does the support of the people amount to? They are powerless. If you are ever to establish your royal house you must have other help."

"And I suppose," Sira continued sweetly, "that you have also arranged a deal with the central banks and the secret war interests?"

Joro coughed uncomfortably.

"As a matter of fact—you see, my dear princess, there are certain commercial interests — transportation, mining, and so forth. They have defied the power of the bankers. They are likely to upset our whole order of society. They need a set-back. And the military men are chafing at their inaction. The war will be ended before too much harm is done, by agreement of the interplanetary bankers. You see—"

"No!" Sira interrupted him coldly. "No! No! No! Oh, I'm sick of the whole thing! I'm sick of the men I know! I hate Scar Balta, and you too. I would rather be the wife of a common interplanetary patrolman than queen of Mars! I withdraw, now!"

JORO, struck by her vehemence, paled. The muscles of his jaw lumped. From a pocket he took a portable disk-radio, an inch in diameter, and spoke a few words. From outside there was a sudden uproar, shouts and curses. The draperies moved, as with an outrush of air caused by the careless handling of an airlock, and the temperature dropped suddenly.

Sira was irresolute only a split second. With a cat-like leap she seized a short sword from the wall, made a lunge at the prince. But Joro, the veteran of many a battle of wits and arms, parried the stroke with the thick barrel of his neuro-pistol, caught the girl's wrist and disarmed her. The screams of the maid went unheeded.

From the other parts of the palace came sounds of struggle, the clashing of sword on sword.

"Sira! Sira!" Joro panted, strug-

gling to hold the girl. "You must give up your impractical ideas! Take the world as it is. Do as I tell you and you'll not be sorry."

"I relinquish my claims!" the girl cried fiercely. "To-morrow I will publicly announce that decision. All my life has been spent feeding that hopeless ambition. Now I will be free!"

"I am loyal to the monarchy," Joro grunted, pinioning her arms at last. "I will guard your interest against yourself."

He began to shout:

"Hendricks, Melvin, Carpender, Nassus! Here, to the princess's chamber."

Several men, after further delay and fighting, responded. They wore civilian blouses and trousers, but there was that something in their alert carriage that proclaimed them trained fighting men. One of them sat down with a grunt on the threshold, holding his hand to a bleeding wound under his armpit. He appeared to be mortally wounded.

MOST of the others carried minor wounds, showing that the palace guards had put up a good battle in the sword-play. Both sides had refrained from using the neuro-pistols for fear that the beams, which readily penetrated walls at short range, might injure the princess.

"Let go!" Sira wrenched herself free. "Where is Tolto? Has Tolto turned traitor? How did you get past Tolto?"

"Do not use that ugly word against me, I implore you!" Joro protested. "What we are doing is out of loyalty to the monarchy—not treason. The monarchy is of greater importance than individuals. Consider your duty to the rule of your fathers! As for Tolto—"

He issued a curt command, and there was the sound of movement. Presently four men staggered in, one to each leg, each arm, of the most impressive giant Mars had ever produced — Tolto, to whom there was no god but the one divinity; and Princess Sira was she. Slow of perception, mighty of limb, he had come into her service from some outlying agricultural region of the red planet. His tremendous muscles were hers to command or destroy, as she wished. He would not have consented to this invasion of her home, she knew!

And he had not. Joro had been too wise to try. A dose of *marchlor* in a glass of wine had done what fifty men could not have accomplished by main strength. Tolto was in a drugged sleep.

Joro said: "He isn't hurt. We will simply send him back to his valley, and you, my dear princess, will do your duty to your subjects!"

And there, though he probably did not know it, Prince Joro harked back to the youth of the human race—the compensatory, atavistic principle that gods, rulers, kings, must hold themselves in readiness as sacrifices for the good of their subjects. Joro might have been a tribal high priest invoking their dread rule in the dawn of time. The Martians were, for all their scientific advancement, still the descendants of those prehistoric human savages. Sira knew, instinctively, that the people who loved her would nevertheless approve of Joro's judgment.

CHAPTER IV

Torture

WHEN Sime awoke it was to the rattling of the door. Murray stirred. The light was even weaker than before.

"If they offer you a drink, drink hearty!" Murray muttered, sitting up. "I've got an idea it's going to be a hard day."

But they were not offered any water. Instead they were again conducted before Scar Balta, who looked at them morosely. At last he remarked gruffly:

"If you tin sojers weren't so cursed stubborn, you could get yourself a nice berth in the Martian army. Ever consider that?"

"Talk sense!" Sime said contemptously. "If I threw down the service how could you trust me?"

"That'd be easy," Balta rejoined. "Once the I. F. P. finds out you joined us you'd have to stick with us to save your skin."

He laughed at his prisoners' look of surprise.

"Come, come!" he bantered. "You didn't think that I was ignorant of your purpose here? You, Murray; your spying was excellent, I'll admit. You were the first to give away certain plans of ours. Well, well! We don't hold that against you. Wheels within wheels, eh? It would perhaps astonish certain braided gentleman of our high command to learn that I, a mere colonel, control their destinies. As our ancestors would say, it's dog eat dog.

"Now, how about it? I can make a place for you in my organization. It seems to run to secret service, oddly enough. You will be rewarded far beyond anything you could expect in your present career of chasing petty crooks from Mercury to Pluto and back again."

"Is that all?" Murray asked softly, with a bearded grin.

"Oh no. You will turn over to me all the information you can about the I. F. P. helio code. You will name and describe to me each and every plainclothes operative of the service—and you should have an extensive acquaintance."

"Before you answer," Murray said quietly at Sime's side, "let me suggest that you consider what's in store for us—or you—if you don't take up this offer."

"Why, you—" Sime whirled in astonished fury upon his companion. "Didn't you—"

BUT he did not complete his reference to last night's surreptitious conversation. It seemed that he saw the merest ghost of a flicker in Murray's left eye.

"—Didn't you say you'd stick no matter what they did?" he finished lamely.

Murray hung his head.

"I'm getting along," he muttered. "Not as young as I used to be. This life is getting me nowhere. Why be a fool? Come along with me!"

"Why, you dirty, double-crossing hound!" Sime's exasperation knew no bounds. For an instant he had believed that Murray was enacting a little side-play in the pursuit of a suddenly conceived plan. But he looked so obviously hangdog—so guiltily defiant. . . .

Crack! Sime's fist struck Murray's solid jaw, scraping the skin off his knuckles, but Murray swayed to the blow, sapping its force, and came in to clinch. They rolled on the floor. Murray twisted Sime's head painfully, bit his ear. But in the next split second he was whispering:

"Keep your head, Sime. Can't you see I'm stringing him? Take that!" And he planted a vicious short hook to Sime's midriff.

Balta had squalled orders, and now Martian soldiers were bursting the buttons off their uniforms in the scrimmage to separate the battlers. Bruised and battered, they were dragged apart. Murray's one eye was now authentically closed, and rapidly coloring up. Unsteadily he got to his feet. With mock delicacy he threw a kiss to his late antagonist.

"Farewell, Trueheart!" He bowed ironically, and the men all laughed.

Balta grinned too. "Still the same mind, Hemingway? All right, men,

take him up to the observation post. Here, Murray, have a drink."

SIME was led up a seemingly endless circular staircase. After an interminable climb he saw the purplish Martian sky through the glass doors of an airlock. Then they were outside, in the rarefied atmosphere that sorely tried Sime's lungs, still laboring after the fight and long ascent. The Sun, smaller than on Earth but intensely bright, struck down vindictively.

"A good place to see the country," laughed the corporal in charge. "Off with his clothes!"

It was but a matter of seconds to strip Sime's garment from him. They dragged him to an upright post, one of several on the roof, and with his back to the post, tied his wrists behind it with rawhide. His ankles they also tied, and so left him.

It was indeed an excellent point of vantage from which to see the country. The fortress was high enough to clear the nearby cliffs of low elevation, and on all sides the Gray Mountains tumbled to the horizon. To the north, beyond that sharply cut, ragged horizon, lay the big cities, the industrial heart of the planet. To the south, at Sime's back, was the narrow agricultural belt, the region of small seas, of bitter lakes, of controlled irrigation. Here the canals, natural fissures long observed by astronomers and at first believed to be artificial, were actually put to the use specified by ancient conjecture, just as further north they had been preempted as causeways of civilization. Sime painfully worked his way around the post so that he could look south. But here too nothing met his eye but the orange cliffs with their patches of gray lichen. There was no comfort to be had in that desolate landscape. Nevertheless, Sime kept moving around, to keep the post between himself and the Sun. Already it was beginning to scorch his skin uncomfortably.

By the time it was directly overhead Sime had stopped sweating. The dry atmosphere was sucking the moisture out of his body greedily, and his skin was burned red. His suffering was acute.

THE Martian day is only a little more than a day on Earth, but to Sime that afternoon seemed like an eternity. Small and vicious, with deadly deliberation, the sun burned its way down a reluctant groove in the purple heavens. Long before it reached the horizon, Sime was almost unconscious. He did not see its sudden dive into the saw-edge of the western mountains—knew only that night had come by the icy whistle of the sunset wind that stirred and moaned for a brief interval among the rocks. The keen, thin wind that first brought relief and then new tortures, to be followed by freezing numbness.

Above, in the blackness, the stars burned malignantly. Drug to his misery they were, those familiar constellations, which are about the only things that look the same on all planets of the solar system. But they were not friendly. They seemed to mock the motionless human figure, so tiny, so inconsequential, that stared at them, numerous tiny pinpricks of light, so remote.

There was no dawn, but after aeons Sime saw the familiar green disk of Earth coming up in the east, one of the brightest stars. Sime fancied he saw the tiny light flick of the moon. There would be a game of blackjack going on somewhere there about now. He groaned. The Sun would not be far behind now.

But he must have slept. The Sun was up before he was aware of it. A man with a caduceus on his

blouse collar was holding his wrist, feeling his pulse. He seemed to be a medical officer of the Martian army. His smooth, coral face was serious as he prodded Sime's shriveled tongue.

"Water, quick!" he snapped,—"or he's done for."

HIS head was tipped back and water poured into his mouth, but Sime could not swallow. The soldier with the bucket poured dutifully, however, almost drowning the helpless man. It helped, anyway; and Sime returned to half-consciousness. A few minutes later, when Scar Balta came to inquire if he had changed his mind, Sime was able to curse thickly. And around noon, when Murray, jauntily dressed in the uniform of a Martian captain, bid him a cheerful good-by, Sime was almost fluent.

His torture had now reached the pitch of exquisite keenness that made it something spiritual. Solicitously they kept him alive, and far back in his mind Sime wondered why they bothered to do that. Couldn't they be satisfied with what they could learn from Murray?

So passed the second day, and the third.

On the fourth day Sime was able to drink water freely, and to eat the food they placed into his mouth, a fact which the medical officer noted. The torture was wearing itself out. Sime's body was emaciated, stringy, burnt black. But his extraordinary toughness was weathering conditions that would kill most men. Balta shook his head in wonderment when this was reported to him.

"Can't wait any longer for him. Must get back to Tarog. You might as well put him out of his misery. By the way, I'm convinced that Murray is double-timing me. But I'll attend to that personally."

From his post of pain Sime saw the official car leave toward Tarog. Had he known of Balta's remark he would not have been puzzled so much by what he saw.

As the ship was about to disappear over the ragged northern horizon, Sime's bleared eyes saw, or he thought they saw, a human figure silhouetted against the pitiless sky. It was a tiny-seeming figure at that distance, but it was clear-cut in the rare atmosphere. Then it plunged from sight.

"Somebody taken for a ride," he muttered, half grateful for the brief distraction from his own misery.

THE medical officer, to whom the long climb was arduous, delayed his mission to the roof, and that was why, several hours later, Sime was still alive to see another ship appear to the north. It was large, sumptuous, evidently a private yacht. Its course would bring it within a mile of the fortress, and with sudden wild hope Sime realized that if he were seen he might expect relief. He began to tug at his bonds. They were tough, but they would stretch a little. His haphazard movements had already worn them against the rough post, and now he began to struggle violently. If he could only get his hands loose, he could wave. . . .

The thongs cut into his flesh, but his wrists were numb and swollen, and he did not mind the pain. His muscles stood out hard and sharp, and with a supreme effort, aided by the growing brittleness of the rawhide in the dry atmosphere, he snapped his bonds.

The ship was now quite near, and he waved frantically. He fancied he saw movement back of the pilot ports. Faintly he heard the hum of the levitators. Now it turned—no! It yawed, now toward him, now away, purposelessly, like a ship in distress. It made an abrupt downward plunge that scraped a crag, and just missed a canyon wall.

Again it twisted, came down with a long, twisting motion, struck a rock upside down, slitting a long gash in its skin, clattered to the rocks so close to the fortress that Sime could not see it. Now desperation gave the prisoner superhuman strength. Regardless of the pain, he burst the thongs about his ankles, tottered to the edge of the roof.

There was a battle going on below. Men seemed to be running, shouting. Someone, using a massive plate of metal as a partial shield against the neuro-pistols, was creating havoc. Sime tried to focus his giddy eyes on the scene. It seemed always to be turning to the left, to be circling around him. With tottering steps he tried to follow it, keeping to the brink of that lofty tower—uselessly. Now it was rocking, flying straight toward him, and, gratefully, Sime gave up the struggle, closed his eyes.

CHAPTER V

The Wrath of Tolto

TOLTO awoke from his drugged sleep in the cargo room of a pleasure ship. He was thoroughly trussed up, for Prince Joro's servants had a wholesome respect for the giant's strength. Even in his supine position power was evident in every line of his great torso, revealed through great rents in his blouse. His thighs were as big around as an ordinary man's body, and the smooth pink skin of his mighty arms and shoulders rippled with every movement that brought into play the broad, flat bands of muscle underneath.

A chain of beryllium steel was passed around Tolto's waist, and close in front of him the smooth, shining cuffs of steel around his wrist were locked to the chain. Short lengths of chain led to cargo ringbolts in the floor, holding fast Tolto's cuffed ankles.

To anyone looking at Tolto just then, these extreme precautions might have seemed absurd. Prince Joro, however, was a good judge of men. It would have pleased him best if Tolto had been quietly eased from his sleep into death, but he knew that such a murder would have destroyed forever his chances of winning Sira to his plans. He meant to see Tolto safely and demonstrably returned to his home valley, and in order to accomplish this the more surely he had him loaded aboard his own ship, and instructed his captain to take the little used desert route.

Tolto lifted his hands as far as he could and looked wonderingly at them. His child-like face, with the soft, agate eyes, expressed only bewilderment. He lifted his voice, a powerful bass.

"Hi, hi! Let Tolto go! The princess may call!"

There was no answer, only the rhythmic hum of the levitators. Again Tolto cried out. But there was no answering sound. The Sun poured in through the ports, and when presently the ship changed its course, the light fell full in his face, almost blinding him. The giant endured this without complaint.

SEVERAL hours later, however, his patience snapped, and he roared and bellowed so loudly that a door opened and a frightened face appeared. Back of it was the chromium glitter of the ship's galley.

"Be still, big one!" admonished the cook. "The captain is resting. He will have you chained standing if you disturb him with your bellowing."

"I wanted only to know where I am," Tolto replied, subsiding meekly. "I drank overmuch and some larksters tied me up like this. Release me, so that if the princess calls I may answer."

"The princess will have to call loudly for you to hear," the cook answered jocularly.

"The princess need only whisper for Tolto to hear," the giant boasted. "Come now, shrimp, take these things off!"

"Are you really as dumb as that?" the cook marveled. "Why, sonny boy, the princess couldn't even hear you! Don't you know where you're goin'?"

Vague alarm began to creep over Tolto.

"Where is she?" he asked anxiously. "Isn't she in this ship? Princess Sira never goes anywhere without Tolto. Ask her. Ask anybody."

"The princess may never go anywhere without you, you head of bone," remarked the cook, rather enjoying his own humor, "but *this* time you're going somewhere without her."

"You talk funny talk, but I can't laugh at it. Little bug, tell me now what this is all about, or I will take you between my fingers and squash you!"

The cook's coral face paled almost to white despite himself.

"Listen, big one," he said placatingly. "Have an orange?"

TOLTO refused the gift, although he knew this rare and luscious importation from the Earth and was very fond of it.

"Once more I ask you, bug, where is she?"

"Aw, now, listen!" the cook whined. "Don't blame me! I'm only a servant around here. How can I help what they do? Don't glare at me so. Well, she's at Tarog."

"But why—why does she send me away?"

The cook failed to recognize his opportunity to lie in time.

"Well, the fact is—" he hesitated. "The boss—Prince Joro's sending you away. You see, she's going to get hitched up—big important guy. They didn't want you around, bustin' up things every time you turn around. So they're sendin' you back home."

"The princess would not send me home like this," Tolto objected. But he held his peace, and the cook went back to his work, satisfied that he had subdued this dangerous prisoner.

In this he was guilty of no greater error than Prince Joro and the other monarchists. For ages there had been an unfounded opinion that big men are generally slow and stupid. They may often act so, for their great strength serves as a substitute for the quick wit of smaller men. But in Tolto, at all events, this prejudice was wrong. In Tolto's bullet head was a healthy, active brain, and a primitive cunning.

So instead of wasting his strength in vain struggles against the tough steel, he rested, marshalling the facts in his mind.

He utterly rejected the thought that Princess Sira had consented to his removal in this manner, or in any manner. That meant that she was being coerced, and Tolto's eyes grew small and hard at the thought.

Presently he began to test the chains. They were of great hardness and toughness, and so smooth that he could not twist them, for the links slid over one another harmlessly. However, after much quiet effort he found that he could shift his body several inches toward either side of the narrow hold. Here there were a number of locked boxes. One of them, he reasoned, might contain tools.

His closely confined hands were practically useless. He found that he could not reach any of the boxes with his fingers, strain as he might. But he grinned with hope when his head struck one of the handles. His strong teeth closed down on it.

THAT would have been something to see! The box was of thin, strong metal, but it was heavy. With no other purchase but his teeth, Tolto dragged it to him, on top of him. Now his hands could help a little. He inched it down toward his knees, fearful each moment that a lurch of the ship might precipitate it to the floor with a crash. When his head could push no longer his knees grasped the end of the chest, and managed to pull it down.

Tolto had never heard of the wrestling hold known as the scissors, but he applied it to that box. His mighty sinews cracked under the strain, and stabbing pain tore at his hips. But he persisted, and with a protesting rasp the lid was telescoped inward, breaking the lock.

Breathless, he waited. After minutes he decided that the sound had not attracted attention.

Again he brought his teeth into play, and this time, when the box stood open, Tolto's lips were lacerated by the jagged edges of twisted metal. Triumphantly, he looked inside.

The box contained a set of counterweights for the hydrogen integrator motors.

No bar, nothing that might be utilized to twist off the eyebolts!

Again he set to work. The next bar was longer, heavier. It was coated with unpleasantly rancid oil. Tolto's broad chest was covered with blood, partly from gouges in his skin, partly from his crushed lips. But this time he found a bar. It was in the bottom, under some extra valves, but eventually his teeth closed on it, and he fell back, nearly exhausted, for a moment's rest.

He heard a door slam beyond the galley. The words floated out:

"—better go see how he's coming along."

THE horrified mate saw the wrecked boxes, the blood-covered giant with a thick steel bar in his teeth, the extra valves scattered about the floor. He whipped out his neuro-pistol, pointed it at Tolto.

But Tolto made no move to resist when the shaken officer gingerly took the bar out of his mouth. He did not move when several shipmen, called by the officer, moved everything out of reach. After half an hour, with many awed comments, they left him alone.

Tolto's battered lips opened in what might have been a grin. Painfully he rolled off the single valve that had been digging into the small of his back. He patiently resumed the tedious task of bringing the valve in reach of his locked hands.

The valve stem was stout, and a foot long. It was just long enough so that Tolto, by lying on his side, could reach one of the eyebolts.

Inserting the stem, Tolto pulled toward him.

The eyebolt turned without resistance. It was free to rotate, and could not be twisted off. A groan escaped from the prisoner.

But in a few moments he tried bending upward. The leverage was highly disadvantageous that way. Still, straining with the last ounce of his strength, he was just able to do it. Pulling down was not so hard.

It took fifty-four motions, up and down, before the tough metal cracked and one chain trailed free.

It was not long afterward that the cook, turning from his work at the electric grill, stared into a face that had once been innocent and peaceful. It seemed the face of a demon.

He would have shrieked, but Tolto took his arm between thumb and forefinger, saying gently:

"Remember, little bug, what I said!"

He was cast, dumb with fear, into the late prisoner's cell.

TOLTO had not bothered to remove the chains, but only to twist them apart by means of such tools as he could find to permit free movement of his arms and legs. They dangled from him, tinkling musically.

Now he strode into the main cabin. The ship's crew, having no guests, were playing the part of guests. A man who was shuffling cards was the first to see him. The cards flew up and showered all over the room.

"He's loose!" this shipman croaked, diving under the table.

"Mr. Yens! Mr. Yens!" shouted the captain, a small, bristling Martian with graying, stiff hair. He snatched the neuro-pistol at his side, pointed it at Tolto, pressed the trigger.

Tolto felt a numbing cold as the ray struck him. But his great body absorbed the weapon's energy to such an extent that he was not killed at once. His flailing arms continued their arc, and one end of chain, whistling through the air, struck the weapon from the officer's hand. Tolto stumbled, recovered. He picked up the pistol and stuck it in his chain belt.

His impulse was to rend, to crush with his hands. The shipmen, except for the officers, were unarmed, and they went down helplessly before the giant fists. Some of them found riot guns, but they might as well have pounded a Plutonian mammoth for all the effect they had on Tolto.

Mr. Yens, the mate, sitting at the controls in the glassed-in cabin forward, turned his head at the captain's cry, and, looking down the short corridor into the main cabin, saw the blood-covered giant coming toward him. Mr. Yens was a brave man; but he had been careless. His neuro-pistol was in his own cabin. He did the best he knew, and snapped the lock.

But Tolto's great bulk smashed in the door as if it were nothing. The unbreakable glass did not splinter, but it bent like sheet metal, and a blow of the giant's fist broke the mate's neck.

The mate had not engaged the gyroscopic control, and immediately the ship began a series of eccentric maneuvers, so sharp and unexpected that no one on board could keep his feet. For a few seconds she straightened, and one of the crew bethought himself of the pistol in the mate's cabin. He sighted on Tolto, clearly visible ahead. Before he could release the ray the ship went into another breath-taking maneuver.

A mountain peak came sliding toward them ominously. They scraped by. The ship dived, throwing Tolto forward, and his instinctive grab threw the elevator up. The levitators screamed madly as they lost their purchase on the air, due to the ship's unstable keel.

"We're goners!" someone shouted. "Kill that fool!"

They bounced off a cliff, turned over and over like a tumbleweed. A cylindrical building, unexpected in this wilderness, loomed up. They seemed about to hit it, but floated past. The rock floor of the valley rushed up. With a crash the ship rolled over, split wide open.

CHAPTER VI

The Fight in the Fort

ITS coming had been observed. Men wearing the uniforms of the Martian army dashed out, their pistols ready. A man dropped out of a gaping hole in the ship's skin, sat down unsteadily. Others dribbled out.

"Crazy man in there!" one of them shouted. "Look out, he's murderous!" The pistols came up. The soldiers began to close in, showing a certain professional eagerness.

They were perhaps within ten feet when a metal plate, sheared off from the pilot's cabin in the fall, lifted up. Barely visible under it was a pair of large, running feet. One soldier, trying to oppose it with his hands, was knocked senseless and bleeding. He might as well have tried to stop an oncoming rocket ship.

Neuro-pistols, bearing from every side, spanged briskly. They partly neutralized one another. Their charges were partly reflected by the metal and partly absorbed by Tolto's great bulk. He was thoroughly confused now. Every way he looked in this glaring wilderness of desert and rocks were enemies.

BUT there! An opening loomed, cool and dark. The fortress entrance. Tolto dashed into it. There was the sharp challenge of a guard, unanswered; the futile hiss of a weapon.

The improvised shield wedged on a narrowing stairway. Tolto let it stick, ran up alone. The stairway went round and round, climing ever higher. The fugitive's lungs were bursting.

At last he came to an airlock. He did not know how to operate it, so smashed through. There was no rush of air, because the pressure had already been equalized in the rush to the wreck at ground level. Panting, listening for pursuers, Tolto looked around.

He found himself on a circular roof, bare except for the airlock and a number of upright posts, whitened by the Sun.

It was some moments before he saw the unconscious figure of a man lying on the very edge of the lofty tower on which he was standing—a man naked and blackened. He was lying on his face, one arm and one foot hanging over space as though he had fallen unconscious at the very edge of the abyss.

Tolto collected his excited wits. This, at least was no enemy. His enemies were in power here. This must be a victim, a possible ally.

The man was stirring. The overhanging arm was feebly trying to grasp something. If he were to roll over—

He did not have time. Tolto dragged him in to the safety of the airlock opening, where he could watch.

There were sounds of pursuit, faint and cautious.

Tolto grinned at the naked stranger.

"Who are you, little bug?" he asked.

Sime Hemingway tried to tell him, but his swollen tongue would not behave. Instead, he waved in the general direction of the Sun.

Tolto understood. "From Earth? Good guy, prob'ly. Want this dingus?"

SIME was able to take the neuro-pistol. He knew what was expected of him, and strove to collect his faculties so he could obey orders. He crawled a little way into the lock, where he could be in comparative darkness, setting the little focalizer wheel at the side of the pistol for maximum concentration. Such a beam would require good aiming, being narrow, but if it touched a vital center would be infallibly fatal.

Meanwhile Tolto appraised one of the posts on the roof. It was firmly set in masonry, but he found he could loosen it a little by shaking it. Presently he had it uprooted. It made a splendid battering ram, a war club fit for a giant such as he.

"Here they come!" Sime croaked, and, peering around a corner, took careful aim at the foremost attacker. At the first whispering impact of the beam the Martian sprawled, dead.

The soldiers were caught at a disadvantage. They were expecting club or fist, but not the neuro-beam. Nevertheless Sime had no more easy opportunities. The Martians flung themselves down behind the bulge of the curved stairway, and the air became acrid under the malignant neuro-beams.

None of them reached Sime directly, but the stone walls reflected them to some extent, and even under their greatly weakened power he became cold and sick.

The situation was by no means to his liking. There were other weapons to be reckoned with, and he tried to keep consciousness from slipping away from him. When at last his breathing became easier and his diaphragm moved without pain, Sime knew that danger was greatest. For this relief meant that the Martians had withdrawn down the stairway.

"Good-by, boys!" he thought, as he sprinted up into the comparative safety of the open. He motioned to Tolto, who stood hopefully waiting with his great war club, to stand clear.

THERE it was! Sime saw the faint phosphorescent reflection against the stone where the stairway curved. He did not wait to see the tiny pellet of the atomic bomb floating up, but threw himself flat on the roof, tugging at Tolto, who understood and followed suit.

Even lying prone, and below the edge of the explosion cone, they were nearly blown off the roof. Though no larger than a pinhead, the bomb had the power of a thousand times its weight in fulminate of mercury. When the rain of small stones and dust had subsided, they rubbed their eyes and saw that the airlock was no more. In its place was a shallow pit, ending with the top of the battered stairway.

"Down after 'em!" Sime husked out of a raw throat. "Before they think it's safe to come after us!"

He led the way, the giant after him, carrying his club and a huge rock fragment. Sime saw a cautious peering head, and that Martian died instantly. Then they were around the bend and in the middle of a fight. Sime deflected a hand that held a pistol, and its beam killed another Martian who was about to let Tolto have it at close range.

There was a light-wand affixed to the wall a trifle further down. Tolto waded through the ruck of smaller men, tore it from its socket and hurled it up the stairs. A short sword bit into Sime's shoulder, but there was no force in the stroke, for in that instant Sime paralyzed his enemy's heart with the beam.

An officer barked a command, and the spang of neuro-beams ceased, to be followed by the lethal rustling of swords. The passage was too crowded for the neuro-pistols, giving the outnumbered prisoners the advantage.

TOLTO could not swing his club, but he hurled it, like a battering ram, into the middle of twenty or twenty-five of the garrison who were still below him on the steps, trying to get closer. The heavy timber cleared a lane and the two stumbled down over crushed bodies. Sime was now the only one to use his pistol, for he had no friends there to kill accidentally.

The Martians were putting up a game battle. They were heirs to the traditions and the spirit of Earth's best fighting men. Science had given them deadly and powerful weapons that could kill over long distances, but they preferred to get close to their adversaries.

But Tolto was a Martian too. He had seized a sword from a dying hand and was wielding it with aptitude and power. No formal thrust and parry for him, but merely a

savage sweep that sent swords, arms and heads flying indiscriminately.

Sime, following him, his neuro hissing death from side to side, marveled at his ferocity. He saw a bare-bodied, bleeding fighter leap to Tolto's back, his sword poised for a downward stab for the jugular. Kicking viciously at the man who was just then coming at him, Sime tried to bring Tolto's would-be killer down. But Tolto himself attended to him, dashing him to his death with the elbow of his sword arm.

That diversion nearly cost Sime his life. Fortunately for him he tripped, and the sword-thrust that was to disembowel him merely gashed his side. Sime was beginning to enjoy the fight. The exercise was loosening up his cramped muscles, and the shaky feeling due to the reflected beams of the neuro pistols was leaving him.

TOLTO had smashed down the light-wands as they fought their way down the steps, so that now they were in almost complete darkness. One could still see the occasional rise and fall of a glinting sword and the dark shadow of an arm or head. They were almost clear when Tolto received his first serious wound, a stab in the abdomen that let out a sticky stream of blood.

There was an interval of silence, broken only by the groans of the wounded. The air was thick with the odor of raw blood and pungent with ozone. They had fought their way down perhaps two hundred feet of the stairway, and due to its curve they could see neither top nor bottom.

"I'm stuck!" Tolto muttered.

"Bad?" Sime edged to his side, stepping, in the darkness, on the body of the man who had succeeded in delivering that sword-stroke before Tolto's own blade had cleft him. He felt the edges of the wound, but in the darkness could not tell how serious it was.

"Feel sick? Any retching?" he croaked anxiously.

"Tolto's all right," the giant assured him. "I just said I was stuck."

Sime managed to make a hurried bandage out of the slashed fragments of Tolto's blouse, and again they resumed their descent. Strangely, their enemies further up made no move to attack, although there were many left alive.

Sime laid his hand on Tolto's arm.

"Something wrong here. There's somebody at the bottom of the steps, and the fellows above want to give him elbow room. Well, we'll soon see!"

THEY crawled up a short distance, began to haul inert bodies down, dragging them as far as the last curve, until they had formed a barricade of nineteen or twenty of their late enemies. It was unpleasant work, but justified by following events.

"Can you just see the loom of it?" Sime asked.

"Yes."

"Watch!"

Sime felt about until he found a small fragment broken from the stone steps. Keeping well within the shelter of the convex wall, he crept toward the bend.

"Dig your fingers into a joint and hold on," he instructed Tolto, locating a crack for himself. Then he tossed the fragment gently over the barricade of bodies.

There was the click of its fall, and a moment later things seemed to turn around. Clinging like leeches to the wall, the two men resisted the warped gravitational drag that would have flung them down upon their waiting enemies below. They seemed to be hanging in a

well. Sime had a confused impression of piled-up bodies hurtling down—down.

Thereafter everything was normal again, and they were running down the normal steps. Both had swords in their hands now, and within a hundred feet they were upon the "gravitorser" gun. It was a rather cumbersome weapon, comprising a great deal of electrical apparatus, with a D-solenoid surmounting, whose object was to twist the normal lines of gravitation. It was intended for large-scale operations in the open; the few men remaining below had tried a rather risky experiment, for they might have brought the whole fortress down upon them. Now they were untangling themselves from the corpses that had flown at them as iron flies to a magnet.

SIME and Tolto struck them like a tempest. The light was good and the battle short and sweet. Tolto was slowed up a little, but was irresistible, nevertheless. There is nothing surprising about the seeming immunity of a reckless man in battle. He fights by instinct, taking short-cuts that are not as dangerous as they look because the enemy is not expecting them. So Sime and Tolto fought their way down, until there was no one able to oppose them.

Sime pressed a neuro-pistol into Tolto's hand, warned him to sweep the stairs with it, while he coursed around for some of the pellet bombs. He found them, and two of them closed that avenue of attack with a mass of jumbled ruins.

Now they had a breathing spell. A combination of blind luck and foolhardiness had given them temporary possession of this desert outpost. That was their pawn in the game of life and death—the chance to get back and hide among the millions in the cities of the industrial belt. Certain routine precautions had to be taken. They destroyed the radio apparatus, packed a few days supply of food, threw a couple more bombs, and made a search for means of transportation; for there was a desert wilderness of four or five hundred miles to be traversed.

They discovered the egg-shaped hull of an enclosed levitator car in the covered courtyard. It was distinguished by the orange and green stripes which are the Martian army standard. Like all army equipment, it was in excellent condition. The hydrogen gages showed a full supply of fuel.

"We're getting the breaks," Sime crowed to Tolto as they surfeited themselves with water before starting. He had covered his nakedness with an ill-fitting fatigue suit.

"Yeh," Tolto agreed, referring to their numerous wounds with sly humor; "lots of 'em."

NEVERTHELESS, they felt pretty happy when the levitator screws took up their melancholy whine. The rocky valley floor dropped away, and the windowless stone walls of the fortress slid down past them. Now they were even with the top.

Through the ports they could see a group of their late adversaries on the roof, standing in strained attitudes. Their immobility was explained a moment later by an electric blue spark from something in the shadow of their bodies.

Instantly Sime, who was at the controls, threw her hard-a-port, dived, looped up. The first explosion of the tiny projectile tossed them up like a monstrous wave, allowed them to drop sickeningly. The exhaust tubes poured out a dense haze as Sime sought for distance. But they were following him. He was five miles away when they finally got the range. The vessel

was jarred as if it had hit a rock. One of the atomic pellets had exploded within a few feet of it. There was a dismaying lurch. Sime picked himself up from the floor and dashed to the controls.

"Everything's all right!" he shouted excitedly.

Tolto, however, was listening anxiously. There was a sharp crackling at the stern, where, in a narrow space, the reaction motors provided the forward motive power. In moments of excitement he referred to himself in the third person. He did so now.

"Tolto's afraid that something's wrong! Smells hot, too!"

"Here, take the wheel!" Sime ordered. The explosions of the shells were becoming less dangerous; they were getting too far away.

SIME burned his hand opening the narrow door. The paint was already blistering off it. The trouble was immediately apparent. One of the integrator chambers, in which atomic hydrogen was integrated to form atomic iron and calcium (sometimes called the Michelson effect), had sprung a leak. The heat escaping into the little room was not the comparatively negligible heat of burning hydrogen, but the cosmic energy of matter in creation. Sime slammed the door. The radiated light was so intense that it stung even his hardened skin.

Looking through the rear range-finding periscope, he saw that they were about twenty miles from the fort. They had ceased firing.

"Won't be long, Tolto," he said, taking over the controls himself again, "before our tail's going to drop off. Got to make time."

It was, in fact, about ten minutes when, without warning, their nose dropped.

"Tail's gone!" Sime announced.

Their momentum, under the destructive rate of speed they had been making, was great, and as the levitators, with independent power supply, still held them up, Sime continued to steer a course for the twin cities of Tarog. He was aided by a light breeze, and the Sun was nearing the western horizon by the time their rate of motion had become negligible.

"Might as well land," Sime decided. "Conserve fuel. If we get a favorable wind to-morrow we can go up and drift with it."

But Tolto, who had been narrowly scanning the terrain, advised continuing a little longer.

"I thought I saw a little smoke, a few miles ahead. Seems to be gone now. But we're still drifting slow."

SIME searched the indicated spot in the ground glass of the forward magnifying periscope. After a few minutes he discovered a blackened spot which might be the remains of a fire. It was surrounded by huge blocks of orange rock, the igneous rock which is the outstanding feature of the Martian desert landscape.

"Looks like he built the fire around there so nobody on the same level would see him," he hazarded. He set the altitude control to fifty feet. There was part of the globular skeleton of a desert hog in the fire; whoever had built it had dined most satisfyingly not long before, and as the fugitives looked their stomachs contracted painfully.

"I could eat a whole one of them myself," Tolto said wistfully.

The urge to descend here was strong upon Sime too. He realized that the fire might have been made by some dangerous criminal — a fugitive from justice; but dangerous men are no novelty to the I. F. P. On the other hand, there was a possibility that it was just some political offender, driven into the desert by persecution. Or a prospector. At any rate, he would

have food, or would know where it could be procured.

They had drifted some hundreds of yards farther and the ground was getting constantly more broken, so the best time to land was as soon as possible. Slowly the little ship settled, scraped on a rock and arrested its slight forward motion, crunching solidly in the stony soil.

"Take a neuro, Tolto," Sime advised. "Whoever's here, if he or they are dangerous, we won't get close enough to touch 'em with a sword."

Tolto took the weapon without a word. They locked the door of the ship. Men have been marooned for neglecting that little precaution.

They walked in a spiral course, making an ever-widening circle, looking sharply from left to right. Presently they came to the remains of the fire. The ashes were hotter than the ground, proving that they had been recently made.

But nowhere was there any sign of men. They shouted, but only weird echoes answered.

The ship was now out of sight, and solitude pressed upon them. They felt an uneasy desire to get within comfortable constricting walls.

They found the ship without difficulty.

"Well, whoever it was has lammed," Sime concluded. "Tolto, you climb on top of that rock. Watch me. If you see anybody after me, let 'em have it. I'm going to see if I can scare up a desert hog somewhere."

Neither had stirred from his place, however, before they were suddenly stricken to the ground. They felt the familiar sensation of cold and suffocation—the paralysis caused by a diffused beam from a neuro-pistol. Tolto was a little slower to fall, but he only lasted a second longer. They knew that someone was taking the weapons out of their helpless hands. Then life returned.

"Get up," said a languid voice back of them, "and let's have a look at the looks of ye."

CHAPTER VII

The Flight of a Princess

THE province of Hanlon, Prince Joro's hereditary domain, began about fifty miles west of South Tarog. It was a region of thorn forests, yielding a wood highly valued for ship-building, and the canal was lined with shipyards, most of which belonged to the prince. The so-called republic had been established before Joro was born, but the reigning family of Hanlon had always been richly endowed with astuteness. Deprived of their feudal holdings by a coup of state, they had won back nearly all they had lost in the fields of finance and trade. Joro was a monarchist for sentimental reasons, not for the profits that might accrue to him.

It was the purity of Joro's devotion to his ideal that made him so dangerous to all who might oppose him. Lesser men might be bribed, frightened, distracted. Not Joro; he believed that the monarchy would soothe the rumblings of internal dissension that continually disturbed the peace and tranquillity of Mars. He drove forward to that consummation with a steadfastness and singleness of purpose such as have carried other fanatics to glory or to the grave. And in addition to his zeal he carried into the struggle his exceptional ability, a knowledge of government and of people.

HE had need for all of his rare skill now. It had been an easy matter to carry forcibly the Princess Sira to his palace in Hanlon. Tolto was safely out of the way; Mellie had been dismissed. As for

the other palace servants, they had been silenced with bribery or the stiletto.

But Sira had remained adamant, and Joro, abstractedly toying with his laboratory apparatus in the basement of his palace, tried to find the key to her change of heart.

"Can't understand it!" he mused. "She always seemed to have all the royal instincts: cold to suitors, with that delicacy and reserve one finds ideal in a princess. She does all things well, handles a sword nearly as well as I do. Her mind is as keen and limpid as a diamond. She swims like an eel. . . ."

He sighed. "I thought she and I saw eye to eye in this matter. Not more than a week ago she seemed eager for news of the accord I was arranging. She had no great aversion to Scar Balta. Now she says she will die before she espouses him."

He paused, thought a moment, added, with that absolute fairness and impartiality that was characteristic of him:

"True, Balta is not the ideal prince consort. He would not add kingly qualities to the royal line. But he would confer cunning upon his offspring, and energy—neither to be despised in a royal family that must forever resist intrigue." He sighed again. "The responsibility of king-making is a hard one!"

A sudden thought struck him. "She spoke warmly about the proposed war; could that be at the root of her strange change of heart? After all, she is a woman, and with all her fine, true temper she has a gentle heart. To her the death of a few thousands of her subjects may not outweigh the unhappiness that millions are now experiencing. But the financiers demand the war to consolidate their position, and Wilcox is solidly with them."

With new hope he set down the beaker he was toying with. "Perhaps we can outwit them."

HE left the laboratory, climbed a flight of stairs, entered the spacious reception hall. This, like most Martian buildings, was domed. It was richly furnished. The walls were hung with burnished, metallic draperies of gorgeous colors, the floor a lustrous black, the furniture of glittering metal. As the prince entered a servant stepped forward.

"Go at once to the Princess Sira's chamber!" Jore commanded sharply. "Request her to come here. Tell her I have thought of the solution to our difficulty."

Impatiently he paced up and down, stopping at a window for a moment and looking out into the night.

"Your Highness! Your Highness!" The servant was sobbing with excitement. "Your Highness, Princess Sira has escaped!"

Joro left the man babbling, dashed up the broad stairs, unheeding the servants who scattered before him. Their punishment could wait. Just inside the princess's chamber, still unconscious from a blow on the head, lay the guard whose duty it had been to stand before that door. How long ago had she gone? Probably not more than a few minutes.

Joro saw to it that her start would not be much longer. In a few seconds men and women were scouring the palace grounds, and radio orders to the provincial police of Hanlon were crowding the ether.

SIRA had contrived her escape without any particular plan in mind. In fact, it had been initiated on impulse. The fellow on guard at her door had excited intense dislike in her. High-strung, and excited by her kidnaping, she had been further annoyed by his officiousness, his fawning, which thinly disguised impudence. The third or

fourth time that he intruded on her privacy to ask if she wanted anything she was ready with the heavy leg, unscrewed from a chair. She felled him in the middle of a smirk, and seized the opportunity created.

It happened that there was a service corridor close at hand. Down this she sped, into the darkness of a boat-house. The doors were barred and locked, of course, but the depths of the water showed a faint greenish glimmer of light. Sira dived in, unhesitatingly, and after an easy underwater swim she emerged in the open canal. There was a considerable swell, for there was a slight breeze blowing from the north across twenty miles of water, but this did not distress Sira at all. She undulated through the waves with perfect comfort. Phobus was just rising in the west, and orientating herself by this tiny moon she struck out in a northeasterly direction, seeking a favorable current to carry her toward Tarog.

Early explorers on Mars were astonished to find that the canals were not stagnant bodies of water, but possessed currents, induced by wind, by evaporation, and the influx of fresh water from the polar ice caps.

This was near the equator, however, and the water was not unreasonably cold, although the night air was, as usual, chilly. After a few minutes Sira discarded her clothing, and so settled down to a long swim.

TEN miles out she struck a brisk easterly current, flowing toward Tarog, and she gave herself up to it. Floating on her back she saw the lights of the prince's ships flying back and forth over the water in search of her—or her body. But none came near her, and she was content.

The abrupt tropical dawn found her in mid-canal, half-way to Tarog. She had no intention of swimming all the way to the capital city, to be fished ignominiously out of the canal by the police. She was in need, not only of clothing, but of clothing that would disguise her. Her coral pink body near the surface of the water would attract attention for considerable distance, and would lead to unwelcome inquiries.

She was glad when she saw a fishing scow anchored in the current ahead of her. The man who owned it had his back to her, fishing down-current. She approached the boat silently and worked her way around it by holding to the gunwale.

Sira now saw that the fisherman was old, gnarled and sunburned so dark that he was almost black, despite the dilapidated and dirty pith helmet he was wearing. His lumpish face was deeply seamed and wrinkled. His sunken mouth told of missing teeth, and his long, unkempt hair was bleached to a dirty gray.

"Have you an old coat you can lend me?" Sira asked, swimming into view.

The rheumy eyes rolled, settled on the water nymph. The old man showed no surprise, but pious disgust. His eyes rolled up, and in a cracked voice intoned:

"Wicked, wicked! O great Pantheus, thy temptations are great—thy visions tormenting. In my old age must I ever and ever live over—"

"Foolish old man!" Sira snapped. "I'm not a vision!" She dragged down an old sack that hung over the gunwale, washed it, and tearing holes in the rotten fabric for her arms and head, slipped it on. It was a large sack, coming to her knees; satisfied, she climbed aboard, where she spread her black hair to dry.

"Not a vision?" the old man quavered. "Then thou art reality, come to gladden my old age—nay—to return youth to me! In my hut there is an old hag. She shall go—"

SIRA did not answer. She was neither disgusted nor amused by the dark torrent that stirred in this decrepit old fisherman. She saw only that he had pulled in his nets and was bowing his long arms to the oars, pulling for shore.

It took about two hours before they reached the fisherman's hut, a nondescript, low-ceilinged shelter of logs, driftwood and untarnished metal plates off some wreck. Several times they were hailed by other fishermen, who addressed the old man as "Deacon" and asked jocularly about what kind of a fish he had there.

The deacon's wife awaited them. The old man's description of her as a hag had not been far wrong. She was as diminutive and weazened as he was ponderous and heavy. She was acid. Her skin was like a pickled apple's; her expression sour, her voice sharp.

"Hoy there, you old hypocrite!" she hailed when they came in earshot. "So this is the way you lose a day! Who's the hussy with you?"

The deacon nosed the old and evil-smelling scow into the bank. His eyes rolled piously.

"The great Pantheus sent her. He said—"

THE old woman came closer and inspected Sira, who endured her gaze calmly. That look was like the bite of acid that reveals the structure of crystal in metals.

"Why, she's a lady!" she exclaimed then. "Not fittin' to be on the same canal with you! Come in, my dear. You must be nearly dead!"

She conducted Sira into the hut, which was far neater and cleaner than its exterior suggested.

"A lady!" she repeated. "In that heat! Young woman, what made you do it? Look at those arms—near burnt! Let me take off that old sack. But wait!"

She tip-toed to the door, threw back the faded curtain sharply. The deacon, too surprised to move, was standing there in the attitude of one who seeks to see and hear at the same time. He lingered long enough to receive two resounding slaps before fleeing to his boat, followed by a string of curdling remarks.

Back inside, she proceeded to anoint Sira's body, exclaiming her pleasure at its perfection. The oil smelled fishy, but it was soothing, and it was not long before the claimant to the throne of Mars was deep in restful slumber.

Late that afternoon the deacon returned and hung his nets up to dry. He was dour, his fever having left him. But he had a strange story to impart.

"I think that girl I picked up is the Princess Sira," he told the old woman. "On the fish buyer's barge, in the teletabloid machine, I saw the forecast of her wedding to Scar Balta. And I'll swear it's the same girl!"

"And why," queried his wife, "would she be swimming in the middle of the canal if she was getting ready to marry Scar Balta?"

"That's just it!" the deacon exclaimed, and his eyes began to roll again. "They say it's not a love match! Oh, not in the teletabloid! They wouldn't dare hint such a thing. But the men on the barge. They say there's a rumor that she ran away. And she looks like the girl I picked up, though I thought—"

"Never mind what you thought!" she snapped. "It may be. I served the oligarchy and the noble houses—before I was fool enough to run away with a no-good fisherman—

and I can see she is a lady. Well, she can trust in me."

"They say," the deacon hinted, "that if one went to Tarog, and inquired at the proper place, there would be a reward."

The little old woman chilled him, she looked so deadly.

"Deacon Homms!" she hissed. "If you sell this poor little girl to Scar Balta, your hypocritical white eyes will never roll again, because I'll tear them out and feed them to the fish. Understand?"

Considerably shaken, the deacon said he understood.

BUT the next morning, on the placid bosom of the canal, he forgot her warning. The fleshpots of Tarog called him. Tarog, where he had spent youth and money with a lavish hand. Tarog, where a reward awaited him.

He hauled in his anchor, gave the unwieldy boat to the current and bent to the oars.

Back in the hut, unsuspecting of treachery, Mrs. Homms and Sira were rapidly striking up a friendship. A shrewd judge of character herself, Sira did not hesitate to admit her identity, and without any prying questioning the old woman soon had the whole story. It thrilled her, this review of the life she had once seen as a servant.

"I wonder if I will ever see Tarog again!" she sighed wistfully.

"You shall!" Sira promised. "If you help me."

"I will do what I can gladly."

"I need a workingman's trousers and blouse, and a sun-hat that will shade my face. I have a plan, but I must get to Tarog. Can you get me these things?"

"I have no money, but wait!" She rummaged with gnarled fingers in a chink in the wall, withdrew a small brooch-pin of gold, with a pink terrestrial pearl in its center.

"My last mistress gave me this," she said smiling sadly. "I will row to the trading boat and buy what you need. There will be a little money left to buy your passage on a freight barge."

And that was why, when the deacon arrived at the head of a squad of soldiers that evening, there was no girl of any description to be found. Ignoring the cowering and unhappy reward seeker, the old woman delivered her dictum to the sergeant in charge.

"Princess? Ha! The deacon sees princesses and mermaids in every mud bank. His imagination grew too and crowded out his conscience. No, mister, there ain't any princess here."

CHAPTER VIII

In the Desert

MELLIE, Sira's personal maid, was too disturbed by her mistress's kidnaping to seek other employment. She saw the teletabloid forecasts of the wedding, made life-like by clever technical faking, but rumors of the princess' escape were circulating freely despite a rigid censorship. She imagined that lovely body down in the muck of the canal, crawled over by slimy things, and she was sick with horror.

Mellie lived with her brother, Wasil Hopspur, and her aged mother. Wasil was an accomplished technician in the service of the Interplanetary Radio and Television Co., and his income was ample to provide a better than average home on the desert margin of South Tarog. Here Mellie sat in the glass-roofed garden, staring moodily at the luxuriant vegetation.

She looked abstractedly at the young man coming down the garden walk, annoyed by the disturbance. There was something familiar in the sway of his hips as he walked.

And then she flew up the path.

Her arms went around the visitor, and Mellie, the maid, and Princess Sira kissed.

Mellie was immediately confused. A terrible breach of etiquette, this. But Sira laughed.

"Never mind, Mellie. It is good for me, a fugitive, to find a home. Will you keep me here?"

"Will I?" Mellie poured into these words all her adoration.

"Mellie, the time has come for action. Not for the monarchy. I am sick of my claims. I would give it all— You remember the young officer of the I. F. P.? The one who kissed me?"

"Yes."

"Well, that comes later. First I must consider the war conspiracy. Have you heard of it?"

"There are rumors."

"They are true. Will Wasil help me?"

"He has worshiped you, my princess, ever since the time I let him help me serve you at the games."

"One more question." Sira's eyes were soft and misty. "My dear Mellie, you realize that I may be trailed here? What may happen to you?"

"Yes, my princess. And I don't care!"

AS Murray parted from his brother-in-arms, Sime Hemingway, on the roof of the cylindrical fortress in the Gray Mountains, he felt the latter's look of bitter contempt keenly. He longed bitterly to give Sime some hint, some assurance, but dared not, for Scar Balta's cynical smile somehow suggested that he could look through men and read what was in their hearts. So Murray played out his renegade part to the last detail, even forcing his thoughts into the role that he had assumed in order that some unregarded detail should not give him away. He convinced the other I. F. P. man, anyway.

But Murray had an uneasy feeling that Balta was laughing at him, and when the shifty soldier-politician invited him into his ship for the ride back to Tarog, Murray had a compelling intuition that he would not be in a position to step out of the ship when it landed on the parkway of Scar Balta's hotel.

Having infinite trust in his intuitions, Murray thereupon made certain plans of his own.

He noted that the ship, which was far more luxurious than one would expect a mere army colonel to own, had a trap-door in the floor of the main salon. Murray pondered over the purpose of this trap. He could not assign any practical use for it, in the ordinary use of the ship.

But he could not escape the conviction that it would be a splendid way to get rid of an undesirable passenger. Dropped through that trap-door a man's body would have an uninterrupted fall until it smashed on the rocks below.

Murray then examined the neuro-pistol that had been given him. It looked all right. But when he broke the seal and unscrewed the little glass tube in the butt, he discovered that it was empty. The gray, synthetic radio-active material from which it drew its power had been removed.

Murray grinned at this discovery, without mirth. It was conclusive.

AT the first opportunity he jostled one of the soldiers, knocking his neuro-pistol to the floor—his own too. And when he apologetically stooped and retrieved them the mollified soldier had the one with the empty magazine.

So far, so good. Murray noted that the wall receptacles were all provided with parachutes. It would be simple to take one of these, make a long count, and be on the ground before he was missed. Provided that he could leave unobserved.

The ship was now well in the air, and beginning to move away from the fort. But they were only ten miles away, and Murray had hardly expected that Balta would be in such a hurry.

"You get off here!" Balta said, and Murray felt the muzzle of the neuro-pistol on his spinal column.

A grinning soldier seized a countersunk ring and raised the trapdoor.

"So you're going to murder me," Murray said, speaking calmly.

"I take no chances," was Balta's short answer. "Step!"

Murray stepped, swaying like a man in deadly fear. He lowered his feet through the hole. Looking down, he saw that they were about to pass over a bitter salt lake, occasionally found in the Martian desert. He looked up into the muzzle of the menacing neuro-pistol.

"Balta, you're a dog!" he stated coldly.

"A live dog, anyway," the other remarked with a twisted grin. "You know the saying about dead lions."

Murray's fingers clenched on the edge of the rug. It was thin and strong, woven of fine metal threads. They were just over the edge of the salt lake.

Murray dropped through, but retained his death-like grip on the rug. It followed jerkily, as the men above tripped, fell, and rolled desperately clear.

MURRAY'S heart nearly stopped as he fell the first thousand feet. The rug, sheer as the finest silk, failed to catch the wind. It ran out like a thin rivulet of metal, following Murray in his unchecked drop.

But he had a number of seconds more to fall, and he occupied the time left to him. He fumbled for corners, found two, lost precious time looking for the others. He had three corners wrapped around one hand when the wind finally caught the sheer fabric, bellied it out with a sharp crack. The sudden deceleration nearly jerked his arm out.

Even so, he was still falling at a fearful rate. The free corner was trailing and snapping spitefully, and the greasy white waters of the lake were rushing up!

At any rate, the rug held him upright, so that he did not strike the water flat. His toes clove the water like an arrow, and the rug was torn from his grasp. The water crashed together over his head with stunning force. After that it seemed to Murray that he didn't care. It didn't matter that his eyes stung—that his throat was filled with bitter alkali. All of his sensations merged in an all-pervading, comfortable warmth. There was a feeling of flowing blackness, of time standing still.

Murray's return to consciousness was far less pleasant. His entire body was a crying pain; every internal organ that he knew of harbored an ache of its own. He groaned, and by that token knew that he was breathing.

As unwillingly he struggled back to consciousness he realized that he was inside a rock cave, lying on a thin, folded fabric that might well be the rug that had served as an emergency parachute. He could see the irregular arch of the cave opening, could catch hints of rough stone on the interior.

HE sat up with an effort. There was a vile taste in his mouth, and he looked around for something to drink. There was a desert water bottle standing on the floor beside him. That meant he had been found and rescued by some Martian desert rat who had probably witnessed his fall. He rinsed out his mouth with clean, sweet spring water from the bottle, drank freely. His stomach promptly took

advantage of the opportunity to clear itself of the alkali, and Murray, controlling his desire to vomit, crawled outside into the blinding light of the Martian afternoon. He saw that the cave was high up on the side of one of the more prominent cliffs. There were many such hollowed places, indicating that the sloping shelf on which he now lay had once been the beach of a vast sea which at some time must have covered all but the higher peaks of the Gray Mountains. It was, of course, the sea that had deposited the scanty soil which here and there covered the rocks. During geologic ages it shrunk until it all but disappeared, leaving only a few small and bitter lakes in unexpected pockets.

There was a succession of prehistoric beaches below Murray's vantage point, marking each temporary sea level, giving the mountain a terraced appearance. A thousand feet below was the white lake, sluggish and dead.

Murray was looking for the man who had saved him. He was able to discern him, after a little effort, toiling up the steep slopes. He was still nearly all the way down. He could see only that he seemed to be dressed in white desert trousers and blouse, and that he wore a broad-brimmed sun helmet. He was carrying something in a bag over his shoulder. He was making the difficult ascent with practiced ease, his body thrown well forward, making fast time for such an apparently deliberate gait.

THE desert glare hurt Murray's eyes. He closed them and fell asleep. He awoke to the shaking of his shoulder, looked up into a black-bearded face, a beard as fierce and luxuriant as his own. But where Murray was bald, this man's hair was as thick and black as his beard. He had thrown off his helmet, so that his massive head was outlined against the sky. His torso was thick, his shoulders broad. Large, intelligent eyes and brilliant coral skin proclaimed this man to be a native of Mars.

The man's white teeth flashed brilliantly when he spoke.

"Feeling better? Man, you can feel good to be here at all! Time and again have I seen Scar Balta drop 'em into that lake, but you're the first one ever to break the surface again. He gave you a break, though. First time he ever gave anybody as much as a pocket handkerchief to ease his fall. That lake is useful to Scar. It keeps the bodies he gives it, and none ever turn up for evidence."

Murray was still struggling with nausea. "Want to thank you," he managed. "I got it bad enough. Ow! I feel sick!"

The Martian bestirred himself. He scraped up the ancient shingle, making a little pillow of sand for Murray's head. The Sun was already nearing the western horizon, and its heat was no longer excessive. Murray watched through half-closed lids as the big man descended a short distance, returning with an armful of short, greasy shrubs. He broke the shrub into bits, made a neat stack; stacked a larger ring of fuel around this, until he had a flat conical pile about eight inches high and two feet in diameter.

FROM a pocket safe he procured a tiny fire pellet. This he moistened with saliva and quickly dropped into the center of his fuel stack. The pellet began to glow fiercely, throwing off an intense heat. In a few seconds the fuel caught, burning briskly and without smoke.

"Wouldn't dare do this in the open," the Martian explained, "if this stuff gave off any smoke at

all. The pulpwood mounds down in the flats make a nice fire, but they smoke and leave black ashes, easy to see from the sky. Now you just rest easy. You'll feel better soon as you get some skitties under your belt."

The skitties proved to be a species of quasi-shellfish, possessing hemispherical houses. In lieu of the other half of their shell they attached themselves to sedimentary rocks. They were the only form of life that had been able to adapt themselves to the chemicalization of the ancient sea-remnant. The Martian had left them thin flakes of rock. Now he placed the shells in the red-hot coals, and in a very short time the skitties were turning out, crisp and appetizing. Following his host's example, Murray speared one with the point of his stiletto, blew on it to cool it. It proved to be delicious, although just a trifle salty.

"Drink plenty water with it," the Martian advised him. "Plenty more about five hundred feet down. Artesian spring there. Fact is, that's all that keeps that lake from drying up. You ought to see the mist rise at night."

Murray ate four of the skitties. Then, because the sun was getting ready to plop down, they carefully extinguished the fire, scattering the ashes. The I. F. P. agent felt greatly strengthened by his meal and assisted his host with the evening chores. Nightfall found them in their darkened cave, ready for an evening's yarning.

"I TOOK the liberty of examining your effects," the Martian began. "Sort of introduced you to myself. The fact that you wore the Martian army uniform was no fine recommendation to me, though I once wore it myself. Your weapons I hid, except for the knife you needed to eat. But you'll find them in that little hollow right over your head. The fact that you're an enemy of Scar Balta is enough for the present. That alone is repayment for the labor of carrying you up all this way."

Murray then told him of work on Mars. There was no use concealing anything from one who was obviously a fellow fugitive, and who might be persuaded to do away with his guest, should he have strong enough suspicions. He told of the war cabal, of the financial-political oligarchy and its opposing monarchists. He related his own discovery and arrest; the pretended enlistment in Scar Balta's forces which terminated in Scar's prompt and ruthless action. When he finished he sensed that he had made a deep impression on his host. The latter spoke.

"What you have told me, Murray, relieves me very much," he said. "I know that we can work together. You might as well know how I came to be here. Perhaps I look forty or fifty years old. Well, I'm thirty. I was news director for the televisor corporations. I didn't have to be very smart to realize that a lot of the stuff we were ordered to send out was propaganda, pure and simple. Propaganda for the war interests, propaganda for the financiers. Commercial propaganda too.

"Why, the stuff we put out was a crime! The service to the teletabloids was the worst. You know how they outstrip the news; hired actors take the part of personages in the news. Ever watch 'em? The way they enact a murder is good, isn't it?

"WE got orders to bear down on your service too, the I. F. P. Your crew has too many points of contact, hiking from planet to planet. The high command couldn't see things the bankers liked, I guess.

"So whenever a man of the I. F. P. figured in the news we always gave him the worst of it. We hired bums to play his part, criminals, vicious degenerates. People believe what they see—that's the idea. I had seen very few of your men, but I knew we were giving them a dirty deal. Orders were orders, though. We got lots of orders we didn't understand. Then secret deals were made, and those orders countermanded.

"But the order against the I. F. P. remained standing, and we certainly did effective work against 'em. The people had no way of knowing the difference, either, for the company controls all means of communication, and the I. F. P. does most of its work in out of the way places. Why, just to show you how effective our work was—the people, in a special plebiscite, voted to withdraw their support from the Plutonian campaign! But that was going too far; the financiers quietly reversed that.

"At the same time, we got orders to glorify Wilcox, the planetary president. It was Wilcox signing a bill to feed the hungry—after their property had been stripped by the taxes. It was Wilcox the benevolent; Wilcox the superman. Wilcox, in carefully rehearsed dramatic situations, reproduced on the stereo-screens in every home. You know who put over the slogan, 'Wilcox, the Solar Savior?' We did it. It was easy!" He laughed shortly.

"The only time we failed was when they wanted to end, once and for all, the prestige of the royal house. That was after they had bought the assassination of the claimant, his wife and their son. Didn't dare take Princess Sira too, because she has always been a popular darling. It would have been too raw, wiping out the whole family. They left one claimant, see? And then put it up to us to discredit her!

"MAN! That fell down! The first attempt was very smooth, at that. But it brought in such a storm of condemnation they had to drop that.

"You can guess how we boys at the central office felt about it. No wonder we got cynical and lost all self-respect. We couldn't have stood it at all, but sometimes we'd put on a special party, just to let off steam. Did we rip 'em up high and handsome? The more outrageous the flattery we sent out, disguised as news, the more baldly truthful we were in those early morning rehearsals, with the mikes and telegs dead. Wilcox was our special meat.

"Of course, it was foolhardy. One night a mixer in the room below us got his numbers mixed, killing a banquet program on a trunk channel and sending our outrageous burlesque out instead. When the poor fellow discovered his mistake he made for the bottom of the canal. As for me, I made for the desert. I never heard what became of the others, and that was six years ago. I wonder if I've changed much."

"What's your name?" Murray asked suddenly.

"Tuman. Nay Tuman."

"The others must have been caught. As for yourself, orders have been sent all over the solar system to kill you on sight. They hung the killing of that electrician on you."

"That's their way!" Nay Tuman assented gloomily. "A price on my head. They thought I'd stow away on some rocket liner, I suppose."

"Weren't you afraid some desert rat would give you away?"

"No danger. They're just about all fugitives themselves. They hid me till I grew this foliage. They showed me how to find food and water, where seemingly there was

none. The desert isn't sterile. Why, I know of three or four men within fifty miles of here! Sometimes they stop at my spring for water. As for the harness frames at the fort, those sojers might as well be blind, considering all they miss."

"You asked a while ago if you've changed much. You have. I remember your picture. All of us studied it, because there's a 100,000 I. P. dollar reward out. You were a slim lad then, not the fuzzy bear you are now. How would you like to go in to Tarog with me? They seem to have us licked now—but did you ever hear that the I. F. P. is most dangerous when it's been thoroughly licked?"

"I don't know—I'm used to the solitude," Tuman demurred. "In the city I'd be lost."

But Murray won him over. He had a persuasive way with him.

THE next morning they started, guiding their course by the Sun. They made no attempt to travel fast, but the going was easy. Although they rested during the heat of the day, and buried themselves for the nights in the sun-warmed sand, they made about fifteen miles a day. They saw no other human being. These desert dwellers did not meet for mere sociability.

They left the mountains on the second day, descending to the lower level of a broad, sterile plain which was studded by the low, greenish pulp-mounds that resembled mossy rocks more than vegetation. After two days more they came to a region where huge blocks of stone, of the prevailing orange or brick color, lay scattered around on the plain.

"They look good to me," Tuman said. "If some patrol comes along now we'll have plenty of cover, at least. This belt is a hundred miles wide, maybe a little more. Good hunting there. Plenty of desert hogs, as fat and as round as a ball of bovine butter. I can knock 'em over with a rock, and you can use your neuro, in a pinch."

They did, in fact, succeed in capturing one of the little creatures soon afterward, and, dropping a moistened fire pellet on top of a pulp-mound, soon were roasting their meat.

Not once, however, did either one relax his vigilance. Almost simultaneously they discovered the little black dot that seemed to pop out of the irregular southern horizon. They leaped to their feet, kicked out the fire. They would have covered the ashes with sand, but for hundreds of feet in either direction there was nothing but bare rock.

"Never mind!" Murray said. "Let's make for cover. They may think it's an old fireplace. With rains only about once in three years that spot will look like that indefinitely."

"Yes," Tuman agreed, running along, "if they didn't see the smoke!"

AS the craft neared they could make out the orange and green of the Martian army.

"From the fort," Murray guessed. "Scar Balta must have had his doubts about me. He ordered them out to finish the job, if necessary."

"It's drifting," Tuman observed. "The driving tail seems to be missing."

"Well, anyway, it's coming down, and where an army ship comes down is no place for us."

They heard the scrape of her keel as she settled down. Murray gave a gasp of surprise.

"Tuman," he muttered, "that fellow wearing the Martian uniform is an I. F. P. agent named Hemingway. The uniform doesn't fit, and I bet the man he took it from is no longer alive. Do you know the giant with him?"

"Under that dirt and blood, I'd says he's Tolto, Princess Sira's special pet. No other man of Mars could be that big! Seven or eight years ago—she was just a kid, you know—she picked him up in some rural province. Kids just naturally do run to pets, don't they? And the princess was no exception. But he looks like nobody's pet now. I'd rather have him peg me with his neuro, though, than to take me in his hands!"

They watched as Sime and Tolto slowly walked about in widening circles, and when they were sufficiently far away Murray and Tuman closed in. They had no expectation of finding the ship unlocked, and wasted no time trying to get it. Instead they climbed a flat-topped block of stone about ten feet high. From this position they could command, with Murray's neuro, anyone who might seek to enter the ship.

"These fellows are our best hope," Murray told Tuman. "But we have to convince 'em that we're friends first. Otherwise we're liable to be cold meat, and cold meat can't convince anybody. Keep your head down."

The necessity of lying flat, in order to keep from silhouetting themselves against the sky, deprived them of the opportunity to see. Nevertheless, they could tell, by the sound of their voices, when Sime and Tolto returned. When it seemed that they were directly beneath, Murray risked a look. There they were.

Murray carefully set the little focalizer wheel for maximum diffusion. He felt sure that it would not be fatal, considering the distance and the physical vigor of the men he meant to hold. He pressed the trigger.

"Get down quick!" he snapped. "I'll let up for a second; you grab their neuros."

Tuman executed the order with dispatch. Stepping back, he trained the pistols on their late owners, while Sime and Tolto, a little dazed, stumbled to their feet. A man may argue, or take chances, when menaced by a needle-ray, but mere bravery does not count with the neuros. All men's nervous systems are similar, and when nerves are stricken, courage is of no avail.

CHAPTER IX

Plot and Counter-Plot

As these four men faced one another in the slanting rays of the setting Sun far out on the desert, the planetary president, Wilcox, sat in his office in the executive palace in South Tarog, situated, as were so many of the public buildings, on the banks of the canal.

Wilcox was in his sixties. A gray man, pedantic in his speech, his features were strong; his nose, short and straight, somehow expressed his intense intolerance of opposition. His long, straight lower jaw protruded slightly, symbolizing his tenacity, his lust for power. His eyes, large, gray, intolerant, looked before him coldly. Wilcox was the result of the union of two root-stocks of the human race, of a terrestrial father, a Martian mother. He had inherited the intelligence of both—the conscience of neither.

Now he sat in a straight, severe chair, before a severe, heavy table. Even the room seemed to frown. Wilcox's face was free of wrinkles, yet it frowned too. He seemed not to see the flaming path the setting Sun drew across the broad expanse of the canal, for he was thinking of bigger things. Wilcox was a little mad, but he was a madman of imagination and resource, and he was not the first one to control the destinies of a world.

"Waffins!" His voice rang out

sharp and querulous. A servant, resplendent in the palace livery of green and orange, was instantly before him, bowing low.

"Who awaits our pleasure?"

"Scar Balta, sire," answered Waffins, bowing low again.

"We will see him."

Waffins disappeared. Scar Balta came in alone, sleek as usual, showing no trace of his irritation over his long wait. He did not even glance at the somber hangings that concealed a number of recesses in the wall. Scar knew that guards stood back of those hangings, armed with neuro-pistols or needle-rays as a precaution against the ever-present menace of assassination. And of the loopholes back of these recesses, with still other armed men, as a constant warning to any of the inner guards whose thoughts might turn to treachery.

SCAR BALTA bowed respectfully.

"Your Excellency desired to see me?"

"I wished to see you, or I should not have had you called," Wilcox replied irritably. "I wish to have an explicit understanding with you as to our proceeding next week at our conference with the financial delegates. Sit here, close to me. It is not necessary for us to shout our business to the world."

Balta took the chair beside Wilcox, and they conversed in low tones.

"First of all," Wilcox wanted to knew, "how is your affair with the Princess Sira progressing?"

"Your Excellency knows," Balta began cautiously, "that the news agencies have been sending out pictorial forecasts—"

"Save your equivocation for others!" Wilcox interrupted sharply. "I am aware of the propaganda work. It was by my order that the facilities were extended to you. I am also aware that the princess escaped from Jolo's palace. An amazing piece of bungling! Did she really escape, or is Jolo forwarding some plot of his own?"

"He seems genuinely disturbed. He has spent a fortune having the canal searched by divers, flying ships and surface craft. If Sira fails to marry me Joro's life ambition will fail, for the hopes of the monarchists will then be forever lost."

"True; but has Joro some larger plan? His is a mind I do not understand, and therefore I must always fear. A man with no ambition for himself, but only for an abstract. It is impossible!"

"Not impossible!" Balta insisted. "Joro is a strange man. He believes that the monarchy would improve conditions for the people. And, Your Excellency, wouldn't I be a good king?"

WILCOX looked at him morosely. His low voice carried a chill.

"Do not anticipate events, my friend! There are certain arrangements to be made with the bankers regarding the election of a solar governor!" His large gray eyes burned. "Solar governor! Never in history has there been a governor of the entire solar system. Destiny shapes all things to her end, and then produces a man to fill her needs!"

"And that man sits here beside me," Balta added adroitly. Wilcox did not sense the irony of the quick take-up. He had been about to complete the sentence himself. But his mind was practical.

"The bankers must be satisfied. The terrestrial war must be assured before they will lend their support."

"It is practically assured now," Balta insisted. "Our propaganda bureau has been at work incessantly,

and public feeling is being worked up to a satisfactory pitch. Only last night two terrestrial commercial travelers were torn to pieces by a mob on suspicion that they were spies."

"Good!" Wilcox approved. "Let there be no interruption in the work. Our terrestrial agents report excellent results on Earth. They succeeded in poisoning the water supply of the city of Philadelphia. Thousands killed, and the blame placed on Martian spies. Our agents found it necessary to inspire a peace bloc in the pan-terrestrial senate in order to keep them from declaring war forthwith. But these things are of no concern to you. Have you made the necessary arrangements with the key men of the army?"

"I have, Your Excellency. They are chafing for action. The overt act will be committed at the appointed time, and the terrestrial liner will be disintegrated without trace."

"And have you made arrangements for the disposal of the ship's records?"

"OUR own ship? I thought it best to have a time bomb concealed aboard. That way not only the records will be destroyed but there will be no men left to talk when the post-war investigating commission comes around."

"Well managed!" Wilcox approved shortly. "See that there is no failure!" He dismissed the young man by withdrawing to his inner self, where he rioted among stupendous thoughts.

Scar Balta emerged into the streets, brightly illuminated with the coming of night, and his thoughts were far from easy. The absence of the princess was a serious handicap—might very easily be disastrous. With her consent and help it would have been so simple! The people, entirely unrealizing that their emotions were being directed into just the channels desired, could most easily be reached through the princess.

First the war, of course, and then, when the threatened business uprising against financial control had been crushed, a planet-wide sentimental spree over the revival of the monarchy and the marriage of the beautiful and popular princess. As prince consort, Scar would then find it a simple matter to maneuver himself into position as authentic king.

But without the princess! Ah, that was something else again! For the first time in his devious and successful career, Scar Balta felt distinctly unhappy. He had schemed, suffered and murdered to put himself in reach of this glittering opportunity, and he would inevitably lose it unless he could find Sira.

In the midst of his unhappy reflections he thought of Mellie.

SIRA knew well that Wasil adored her. He had for her the same dog-like devotion that Mellie had. She knew she could ask for his life and he would give it. And what she had planned for him was almost equivalent to asking for his life.

She told him as much, sitting beside him on a bench in the garden. His smooth, coral face was alight, his large eyes inspired.

"I will do just as you have commanded me!" he declared solemnly, and would have kissed her hand.

"You must not only do it; you must keep every detail to yourself. You must not even tell Mellie. Do you promise?"

"I promise!"

She kissed him on the forehead. "Farewell, Wasil. I have been here two days already—far longer than prudence allows. They will be here

looking for me. Have you any money?"

Wasil produced a roll of I. P. scrip; handed it to her.

"Kiss Mellie for me," she called, as she slipped out of the garden. She was still dressed in the coarse laborer's attire that she had bought on the trading boat, and mingled readily with the crowds in the streets. She hoped she would not meet Mellie, for the girl's devotion might outweigh her judgment.

The rest of that day Sira prowled about the city. Mingling with the common people, she came to have a new insight in their struggles, their sorrows. Passing the walls of her own palace, now locked and sealed, she felt, strangely, resentment that there should be such piled-up wealth while people all around lacked almost the necessities of life.

SHE surprised herself, also, by a changing attitude toward the life ambition of Prince Joro. The old man's discussions of social conditions that could be corrected by a benevolent monarch had always before seemed to her merely academic and without great interest. Such co-operation as she had given him was motivated entirely by personal ambition. Now she recalled some of Joro's theories, reviewed them in her mind, half consenting.

Always she would strike a barrier when she came to Scar Balta The more she thought of him the more he repelled her. She puzzled over that. Scar was quite personable.

Tarog, every industrial city along the equatorial belt, and even the remotest provinces, were seething with war talk. The teletabloids at the street corners always had intent audiences. Sira watched one of them. Disease germs had been found in a shipment of fruit juices from the Earth. The teletabloids showed, in detail, diabolical looking terrestrials in laboratory aprons infecting the juices. Then came shocking clinical views of the diseases produced. Men, on turning away, growled deep in their throats, and women chattered shrilly. The parks were milling with crowds who came to hear the patriotic speakers.

There was hardly anyone at the stereo-screens, where the news of real importance was given.

"President Wilcox announced today that an interplanetary conference of financiers will be held in his office three days from to-day, beginning at the third hour after sunrise. President Wilcox, whose efforts have been unremitting to prevent the war which daily seems more inevitable, declared that the situation may yet be saved unless some overt act occurs." At the same time the device showed a three-dimensional picture of the planetary president, impressive, dominating, stern with a sternness that could mean almost anything.

Sira, hurrying home to an inexpensive lodging house, thought:

"Three days from to-day! I have done what I could. The hopes of the solar system now rest with Wasil. I am only a helpless spectator."

TAROG awaited the conference on the morrow, bedecked like a bride. The Martian flag, orange and green, fluttered everywhere. On both sides of the canal the brilliantly lighted thoroughfares were restless with pedestrians, and the air was swarming with taxicabs. Excitement was universal, and business was good.

The glare of the twin cities could be seen far out in the cold desert. Four men, stumbling along wearily, occasionally estimated the distance with wearied eyes and plodded onward.

After a long silence Murray remarked:

"It's just as well that the levitators gave out when they did. We were drifting mighty slow—making practically no time at all. Probably we'd have been spotted if we'd gone much further."

"Yeh?" Sime Hemingway conceded doubtfully. "But they may spot us anyway. We have no passes, and none of us looks very pretty. As for Tolto, we could hide a house as easy as him."

"But we must go on," said Tuman, the Martian. "Yonder lights seem too bright, too numerous for an ordinary day. There's some kind of celebration."

They trudged on for several hours more. Although weariness made their feet leaden and pressed on their eyelids, they dared not halt. Each one nursed some secret dread. Tolto thought of his princess, his child goddess, and mentally fought battle with whomever stood between him and her. Sime and Murray saw in those lights only war, swift and horrible. Tuman imagined a city full of enemies, ruthless and powerful.

Gradually, as they came closer, the lights began to go out one by one. The city was going to bed.

AN hour later they came to an illuminated post marking the end of a street. A teletabloid was affixed to this post, buzzing, but its stereo-screen blank. Murray found a coin, inserted it in the slot.

"Marriage of the Princess Sira and Scar Balta will be held immediately after the financial congress," the machine intoned briskly, and in time with its running comments it began to display pictures.

Sime, watching indifferently, caught his breath. It seemed to him that he knew this girl, who appeared to be walking toward him up a stately garden alley. She came steadily forward with a queenly, effortless stride. And now it seemed as if she had seen him, for she turned and looked straight into his eyes. It seemed that her expression changed from laughing to pleading. And he recognized the girl with the stiletto whom he had caught in his hotel room.

He said nothing, however. He could hardly explain the feeling of sadness that came over him. He stood silent, while the others commented excitedly over the overshadowing war news.

"It's all in the box," Tuman said gloomily. "Many times I've helped cook up something like this. The boys in the central offices are laughing, or swearing, as the cast may be. The poor devils don't own their own souls, if they're equipped with any. I'd rather be here, expecting to be thrown into a cell by daylight!" He shivered in the night chill.

They ran into a little luck when they needed it most. A roving taxi swooped down upon them, hailed them for fares. They flew the rest of the way in. Their luck held. A city policeman, noting their stumbling walk as they lurched into a cheap hotel, did not trouble them for their passes. He had seen many such men that night, soldier and civilian, with clothes bloody and torn. The excitement of the day, coupled with the fact that nearly everyone carried arms, had led to numerous fights, not a few of which ended fatally.

"Merclite!" grinned the policeman, suppressing a hiccup of his own. "And besides, that big 'un would make two of me."

CHAPTER X

One Thousand to One

THE scheme that Sira had imparted to Wasil was simple—simple and direct. Moreover, it was

sure, provided it succeeded. Its execution was something else again. Its chances were, mathematically expressed, about as follows:

If every single detail worked as expected, a great and smashing success. Ratio: 1:1,000.

If one single detail failed, immediate and certain death for Wasil. Ratio: 1,000:1.

The princess knew that the power of Wilcox, his supporting oligarchy and the interplanetary bankers, was all based on the skilful use of propaganda. If the people of Mars and of Earth knew the forces that were influencing them, their revulsion would be swift and terrible. There would be no war. There would be events painful and disastrous to their present rulers, but a great betterment of humanity's condition.

The key to the situation was the news monopoly, the complete control of all broadcasting—of the stereo-screens, the teletabloids—that colored all events to suit the ends of the ruling group. The people of Mars as well as of Earth were capable of intelligent decision, of straight thinking, but they rarely had an opportunity to learn the truth.

They had now, by a knowing play on their emotions, directed by psychologists, been wrought to a point of frenzy where they demanded war. Their motives were of the highest in many individuals—pure patriotism, the desire to make the solar system safe for civilization. The bright, flaming spirit of self-sacrifice burned clear above the haze and smoke of passion.

What would happen if all these eager millions of two neighboring planets were to learn the true state of affairs? Sira knew what transpired in those secret conventions, when double guards stood at all doors and at the infrequent windows; when all communication was cut off and the twin lenses of the telestereos and the microphones were dead. Prince Joro had told her, with weary cynicism. But Joro had also told her that the oligarchs guarded this vital and vulnerable point with painstaking care.

SIRA had reached inside their first defense, however. Wasil was loyal to his salt, but he had both loyalty and affection for Princess Sira. As the day of the interplanetary financial conference leaped into being, he was on his way to the executive hall that lay resplendently on the south canal bank, ready to lay down his life.

The hall proper was really only the west wing of the magnificent, high-arched building. Its brilliant, polished metal facade reflected the light of the rising Sun redly. The east wing, besides housing various minor executive offices, also contained the complicated apparatus for handling the propaganda broadcastings. On the roof, towering high into the air, was a huge, globular structure, divided into numerous zones, from which were sent various wave bands to the news screens both on Mars and on Earth. The planetary rulers had taken no chances of tampering with their propaganda. The central offices, where news and propaganda were dramatized, were in another building, but as everything from that source had to pass the reviewing officer, a trusted member of the oligarchy himself, in his locked and guarded office, this did not introduce any danger of the wrong information going out to the public.

When Wasil reached the broadcasting plant, he was admitted by four armed guards. He locked the door behind him, to find his associates already busy, testing circuits and apparatus. Stimson, the chief engineer, was sitting at his desk, studying orders.

A FEW minutes later he called the men to him. There were three others besides Wasil: young Martians, keen, efficient, and, like most technies, loyal to the government that employed them.

"Sure are careful to-day," Stimson grunted, scratching his snow-white hair, which was stiffly upstanding and showed a coral tinge from his scalp. "Must be mighty important to get this out right. Wilcox personally wrote the order. If any man fumbles to-day, it's the polar penal colony for him!" The Sun-loving old Martian shivered.

"And here's another bright idea. Only one man's to be allowed in the plant after the circuits are all tested! How'n the name of Pluto will he handle things if a fuse blows? But what do they care about that! We're technies! We're supposed to know everything, and never have anything go wrong!"

"But why only one man?" cried Scarba, one of the associate engineers. "It's asking too much! I'll not take it on, far as I'm concerned. My resignation will be ready soon's I can get a blank!"

"I too! I'm with you, Scarba!" "We work like dogs to get everything in first-line condition, and then—" The hard-working and uncomplaining technies were outspoken in their resentment.

"Oh, I see your point," Stimson agreed. "I could stand Balta, but Wilcox is just one too many for me. But do you boys think for one minute we could get away with a strike?" He laughed angrily. "I can remember when the technies were able to demand their guild rights. But you boys weren't even born then. Now, let's get this straight:

"We are going to do just as we are told. Wilcox, of course, never explains an order, but the reason for having only one operator on this job is simply to concentrate responsibility on that one man. There will be no excuse if he fails. Before the convention starts, and after it is over, there will be a message to send out. The convention itself will be secret, as usual. During the convention, there will be some kind of filler stuff from the central office."

"Yeh!" snorted one of the men. "That's the dope, all right. One of us is stuck, but if it's me I'll walk out and head for the desert."

STIMSON looked at him with a sardonic smile. "I forgot to mention: the doors will be locked and barred, and of course there's no such thing as windows."

Wasil whistled. "They're sure careful. Well, Stimson, I haven't a thing to do all day. I'll take it on."

They all looked at him, not sure that they had heard him right.

"What's the matter, sonny?" Stimson said slowly. "Too much Merclite last night? You're shaking!"

"It's an opening!" Wasil insisted. "An opening to tramp ice at the pole for the rest of your life!"

"All right, I'll chance it!"

They consented, without very much argument, to let Wasil have the dangerous responsibility. At 2:30, two and a half hours after sunrise by the Martian reckoning, he signed a release acknowledging all circuits to be in proper order, and was locked behind the heavy doors, alone with a maze of complicated apparatus and cables that filled the large room from floor to ceiling.

Now it was done! Chance had thrown Wasil into a position where he could, without great danger of failure, carry out his plan. But at the same time things had so fallen that he, Wasil, must now die, regardless of the outcome!

If he succeeded in broadcasting the proceedings of the convention, and if they had the effect of arousing the public against Wilcox,

there would still be no escape for Wasil, Wilcox, or Scar Balta, would come straight for this prison, neuro-pistol or needle-ray in hand!"

Even if he should fail, death would be his portion for the attempt.

SO thinking, Wasil sat down and carefully re-checked the circuits. The filler broadcast from central office must be sent to the twin cities of Tarog. Otherwise the convention would learn too soon what was happening, and would interrupt its business. The thousands who waited outside on the broad terraces must be regaled with entertainment, as had been originally planned.

But as for the rest of Mars, and Earth, they would get the truth for once. Those bankers would speak frankly, in the snug isolation of the hall. No supervision here. Conventions, empty politeness, would be forgotten. Sharp tirades, biting facts, threats, veiled and open, would pass across the table between these masters of money and men.

But this time they would be pitilessly bared to the worlds!

Feverishly, Wasil inspected the repeater. It was a little-used device that would, an hour or two later, as desired, give out the words and pictures fed into it. Although Tarog would not learn the convention's secrets as quickly as the rest of Mars, or Earth, Tarog would learn. Wasil threw over the links and clamped down the bolts with a grunt of satisfaction. When a man is about to die, he wants to do his last job well.

Suddenly a red light glowed, and a voice spoke.

"Special broadcast. Tarog circuit only!"

"Mornin', Lennings," Wasil remarked to the face in the screen. "All set? Go ahead."

The central office man held up a thick bundle of I. P. scrip, smiled pleasantly, saying:

"Somebody in North or South Tarog, or in the surrounding territory, is going to be 100,000 I. P. dollars richer by to-morrow. How would you like to have 100,000 dollars? You all would like this reward. It represents the price of a snug little space cruiser for your family; a new home on the canal; maybe an island of your own. It would take you on a trip to the baths of Venus and leave you some money over. Of course you all want this reward!

"Now, if you'll excuse me a moment—"

THE man's picture faded, and the screen glowed with the life and beauty of Princess Sira—Sira, smiling and alluring.

"You all know this young lady," the announcer's voice went on. "The beloved and lovable Sweetheart of Mars, the bride of Scar Balta—"

The Martian's sleek and well-groomed head appeared beside that of the girl.

"—Scar Balta, whose services to Mars have been great beyond his years; who, in the threatening war with Earth, would be one of our greatest bulwarks of security."

The announcer's face appeared again, stern and sorrowful.

"A great disaster has befallen these lovers — and all the world loves a lover, you know. Some thugs, believed by the police to be terrestrial spies, have kidnaped the princess from the palace of her uncle, Prince Joro of Hanlon. It is believed that they had drugged her and hypnotized her, so that she has forgotten her duty to her lover and her country."

The green light flashed, and Wasil broke the circuit. The central man lingered a moment, favoring Wasil with a long wink.

"What a liar you're getting to

be!" Wasil remarked coldly. But the central man, not offended, laughed.

So they were offering a reward! And urging further treachery as an act of patriotism! Wasil was not too much excited, however. The disguise the princess had chosen would probably serve her well. Besides, she had promised to keep in retirement as much as possible.

Clack! Clack! The electrically controlled lock of the door was opening. Only Wilcox knew the wave combination. Wasil felt a chill of apprehension as the door opened and Scar Balta strode in. He was fully armed, dressed in the military uniform; but the former colonel was now wearing on his shoulder straps the concentric rings denoting a general's rank.

CHAPTER XI

Giant Against Giant

ALTHOUGH Princess Sira had promised to keep out of the way, she could not resist the powerful attraction of the executive hall, in which, on this day, the fate of two planets was to be decided. As the crowds of people began to drift toward the hall, she joined them, still dressed in her laboring man's shapeless garments, the broad sun-helmet hiding here face effectively. Her long, black hair was concealed under the clothing. Having nearly been drawn into a brawl the day before, she now carried a stained but still very serviceable short sword that she had purloined from a merclite-drunken reveler in a gutter.

Thousands were already on the terraces surrounding the government buildings. They were milling about, for it was still too soon after the night's chill to sit down or lie on the rubbery red sward. Taxis were bringing swarms over the canal from North Tarog, and water vehicles were crossing over in almost unbroken lines.

Already the merclite vendors were busy, making their surreptitious way from group to group, selling the highly intoxicating and legally proscribed gum that would lift the users from the sordid, miserable plane of their daily existence to exalted, reckless heights.

War vessels now began to course overhead, their solid, heavily plated hulls glinting dully in the sun. Their levitator helices moaned dismally, and as their long, slanting shadows slid over the assembled thousands, it seemed that they cast a prophetic pall; that there was a hush of foreboding.

But the psychological expert high in a nearby tower immediately noted the slump in the psychoradiation meter whose trumpet-shaped antenna pointed downward. At the turn of the dial the air was filled with throbbing martial music, and the expert noted with contemptuous satisfaction that the needle now stood even higher than before.

Sira, caught like all the rest of the people in that stirring flood of music, felt her own pulse leap. But she thought:

"This is the day! Wasil, could I only be with you!"

She thought sadly of Joro, whose shrewd observations and counsel she missed more than she had ever thought possible.

"Poor, dear Joro! You would be a better king than any man you could ever find! I wish I could have done as you wished me to."

THERE was a stir near the main entrance of the hall. A large private yacht was slowly descending. She was bedecked with the green and gold bunting of the terrestrial government, the green and orange of Mars. Her hull glittered goldenly.

"Back!" shouted the captain of a Martian guard detail, the soldiers running with pennant-decked ropes looping after them. The crowd surged against the barrier, but more guards were sent out as reinforcements, until they had cleared a space for the ship and a lane to the hall entrance.

"Mars greets the distinguished guests from our sister planet!" boomed the giant loudspeaker in the tower. Immediately afterward came the strains of the song—"Terrestria—Fair Green Terrestria"—in a rushing torrent of sound. But the frank and fluent melody was strangely distorted, with unpleasant minor turns and harsh whisperings of menace, and the tower psychologist noted a further rise of the needle.

There was a diversion of interest now. The mob of first arrivals, as well as the ever-freshening stream of newcomers, was moving toward the teletabloids and the more conservative stereo-screens. On this occasion they were both carrying the same message, however. Sira heard the propaganda division's latest fabrication about her alleged kidnaping by terrestrial agents. She needed no radiation meter to tell her of the intense wave of hatred for the Earth that swept over the densely packed area. And this was followed by another emotion—a wave of cupidity—set up by the offer of 100,000 I. P. dollars reward for her return. She saw about her faces greedy, faces wistful, even compassionate faces. But outnumbering them by far were faces set in truculent mold.

SIRA moved restlessly from place to place, feeling more deeply depressed with every moment. She felt as if she had been left entirely out of life, friendless, alone. Among all these thousands she had no friend. It seemed to her that never before had there been such a paucity of monarchists. Sharp-featured, with a wire-drawn manner of efficiency and resolution about them, they had constituted almost another race among this practically enslaved people, maintaining for themselves a tolerable position despite the opposition of the oligarchy. Now, however, they seemed to have vanished. All that morning Sira had not seen one. She would not have disclosed her identity, but it would have been comforting to see one of those friends of old.

She was stopped by a jam. Looking between the bodies of two large and sweaty men, she realized that someone was standing on a surveyor's marking block, delivering a speech.

"The great Pantheus has so decreed it," the speaker was shouting in a cracked voice that at times dribbled into a whine. "We must shake off forever this menace from the green planet—this planet dominated by wicked women.

"Oh, my friends, last night they came to me in dreams, these pale women of the green star. They tempted me and they mocked me. They laid their cold hands on my throbbing brow, and their cold hands burned me!

"Oh great Pantheus! How I have suffered! The creatress who in her malice created this wicked world beyond the gulf—"

The Martians were entertained by the quavering denunciation. Some grinned broadly at one another; others placed their thumbs in their ears and wiggled their fingers. But the old man continued. Finally, two of the foremost spectators, sensing the tiny body crowded between them, stepped aside.

"Don't miss this, my little man. Listen, and maybe you will laugh yourself a little bigger." He gave Sira a gentle shove, so that she

almost stumbled over the block on which the speaker was standing.

AND that old man suddenly stopped talking, so that his toothless mouth sucked in, then stood agape. The rheumy eyes rolled, and a wisp of dirty gray hair strayed across his gnarled face. He lifted a shaking hand, pointed a knotty finger.

"There she is!" he croaked. "There she is! I claim—"

"There she is!" guffawed a tipsy merclite chewer. "The creatress, come to punish you! Cut off his nose, O creatress, and stuff it into his mouth!"

There were shouts of laughter, a surge to see better.

"No! No! I, Deacon Homms, claim the reward!" the old man screamed. "She is the princess; I know her. She came out of the canal to tempt me! She is the Princess Sira. Now shall I at last enter the Palace of Joys! I claim the 100,000 dollars!"

But he still had to catch Sira. The crowd, suddenly sensing that this old fanatic might be telling the truth, rushed in savagely, each eager to seize the prize, or at least to establish some claim to a share of the award. Men and women went down, to be trampled mercilessly. Inevitably they got in one another's way, and soon swords were rising redly, falling again.

"Guards! Guards! A riot!" Some were fleeing the scene; others rushing in, grateful for the opportunity to expend excess pugnacity. A fresh platoon of soldiers tumbled out of a kiosk leading to an underground barracks like ants out of a disturbed nest. They deployed, holding their neuro-pistols before them, focalizers set for maximum dispersion, therefore non-fatal—merely of paralyzing intensity. Some of the rioters now turned to run, but others persisted, willing to be rendered unconscious, just so it would be near the valuable princess.

A few moments later the captain of the guard surveyed the mass of paralyzed bodies and the sword-slashed corpses, all intermingled.

"What's this all about?" he demanded of a scarred, evil-looking fellow who was the first to rise to his elbow.

"The Princess Sira! I claim the reward. In there! She stood right there!"

"Get out, you galoon!" the captain growled, knocking the fellow unconscious with the heavy barrel of his neuro. "Sort 'em out there, Moggins, Schkamitch. On the double. You will share, according to rank."

But eagerly as they searched, they did not find Sira. Creeping between the legs of the maddened reward seekers, she had fought clear, had gained the shelter of a tall, red conical tree whose closely laced branches pressed her to the ground, clinging to the greasy trunk.

SHE realized that her sanctuary was none too secure. There would surely be a methodical search after the first excitement, and she would be discovered. She had lost her sun-helmet, but nevertheless she must risk making a break. A large proportion of the people were wearing such helmets. Perhaps she could snatch one.

But before such an opportunity came, she saw a chance to dash to a nearby clump of shrubbery. On the other side was a long hedge, leading to an alley back of a group of warehouses. If she could gain this alley, she felt sure she would be safe for the time being.

All over the park, which was thirty or forty acres in extent, there were minor riots, as some unfortunate was mistaken for the princess and blindly struggled for.

Sira lost no time. She scuttered along the hedge like a frightened kangrat. But as she crossed a small open space, a stentorian voice shouted:

"There she is! That's her! The princess!"

Out of the corner of her eye she saw him, running toward her lumberingly, his great arms outspread. Tuman had been wrong in saying that on all of Mars there was no man as big as Tolto. This one was, and he looked more formidable. Instead of Tolto's normally good-natured face, this one looked like an enraged terrestrial gorilla, although at the moment it was really expressing joy and eagerness.

Several other men joined the chase, and then scores. They were fleeter of foot than the ape-man, but as they passed him in the narrow alley he smashed them to the pavement with casual blows of his terrifying hands. Thereafter he was undisputedly in the lead; the others content to follow in his rear, although many were armed, and the giant was not.

THIS was an advantage to Sira. The whole mob was slowed by the lumbering pace of the ape-man, and she was able to keep in the lead without difficulty. Several times some of her pursuers ran ahead by other routes, intent on snatching her into some doorway. But each time she slashed at them with her sword, springing past.

She had not run very far when her fear of another danger was realized. There was a high, keen whistle overhead, and a scouting police car flashed near. Under the neuro-pistols both hounds and hare would be paralyzed, and she would be easily taken. Sira longed for one of these handy weapons herself, but they were too expensive; she had been unable to secure one.

Now the police car was coming back. The sliding forward door was drawn back, and a man was leaning out, neuro alert. Judging the distance expertly, he pulled the trigger, and a hundred men fell unconscious.

"Got 'em!" he snapped over his shoulder. "The princess is well. Down quick!"

Sira, spared because of the officer's unwillingness to take a chance on injuring her, leaped through a gap in a wall and sprinted through a garden smothered with thick, leathery-leaved weeds, some of them higher than her head. She almost laughed with relief, but as she flitted around the corner of a house toward the street she saw the gorilla-faced giant again in pursuit, and beyond the garden wall the police ship was just settling to the ground.

It just seemed to be raining giants that day. Sira ran out of a narrow gate at the front of the house into the street, to be stopped by a tremendous human framework as solid and unyielding as a mountain. She stepped back, drew her sword—

"Softly! Softly!" a rumbling bass implored. "Doesn't the Princess Sira recognize her servant, Tolto?"

"Tolto!" All at once the tautness went out of her, and Sira leaned against the wall, divided between laughing and crying.

"Tolto and his good friends were looking for you," the big man rumbled anxiously. "The teletabloids said there was a riot coming—"

HE got no further. The gorilla-faced pursuer catapulted himself sideways through the portal, being too wide to go through in the regular way. He emitted a raucous shout of triumph:

"I got her! It's her, all right! I claim—"

As he reached out his enormous sun-blackened arm there was a thud

that seemed to shake the ground. Instantly enraged, the man's little red-rimmed eyes jerked quietly to the dealer of that shocking blow. Then the conical little head sank between the bulging shoulders, the long, thick arms bowed outward, and the ape-man launched himself at Tolto.

That was a battle! On the one side devotion, — simple-minded loyalty and a fighting heart in a body of such mechanical perfection as Mars had never seen before or since. On the other side a primal beast, just as huge, rage-driven, atavistic, savage.

Fists as large as an average man's head, or larger, crashed against unprotected face and body. Gigantic muscles rippled and crackled. Blows echoed from wall to house and seemed to thud against the hearts of the spectators.

It was as if time and memory had come to a standstill. The present was not, nor present ambitions and duties. The soldiers came plunging out into the street, swords in their hands, but they stopped to watch. Sime, Murray and Tuman, used to instant and automatic battle, watched. A struggle so titanic, by tacit, by unconsidered consent, must be left to decide its own course.

TOLTO seemed to be slowly gaining an advantage. During his novitiate as a palace guard the other men had instructed him in the science of their pastime-fighting. Although he scorned to guard against the blows of his savage antagonist, he placed his own punches more shrewdly, more effectively. The ape-faced one, through a red film, sensed that he was being beaten, and that this fight would end in death.

Suddenly he changed his tactics. Rushing in, he threw his arms around Tolto's great torso. He opened his jaws, and his long yellow fangs bit into the flesh of Tolto's shoulder.

Tolto, taken slightly by surprise, met this new menace promptly. Placing his powerful forearm against the battered, hairy face, he attempted to bend the head back. But it was so small, in proportion, and so slippery with blood, that he was unable to dislodge it.

So Tolto matched brute strength against brute strength. His arms encircled his enemy's body, and the tremendous muscles of his shoulders and body began to arch.

So they stood poised for a few seconds, as if on the brink of eternity.

"Go-o-o-wie!" exclaimed one of the soldiers, awed.

Slowly, like the agonizingly slow plastic creep of metal under great pressure, the gorilla-faced giant was yielding. His dark skin became mottled. His breath came gaspingly. His rope-knotted arms slipped a little.

But it was not in him to surrender, which might still have saved his life. With a vicious twisting motion of his head he tried to drag his fangs through the thick muscles of Tolto's shoulder. The wound began to bleed more freely, choking the savage at each labored breath.

Now Tolto began to walk forward. Always his antagonist had to yield a little, unwillingly, grudgingly, just enough to keep the paralyzing pressure on his spine from becoming unbearable. And slowly, inexorably, Tolto followed. His arms tightened. His leg slipped suddenly between the ape-faced man's supports. Tolto grunted. The sound seemed to labor upward from his innermost being, his body's protest as he called upon it for its last reserve of strength.

Like an echo, there was a dull crack, a brief, agonized moan from the ape-faced one; and the savage,

unknown giant slumped to the pavement, dead with a broken back. Tolto staggered to the wall, breathing deeply.

"Man, what a fight! What a *fight!*" The young Martian captain passed a shaking hand over his face. The battle had stirred him more deeply than he wanted to admit. But in a few seconds he came out of his mental maze.

"Attention! All right, men, you're under arrest. As for the girl—"

"As for the girl," came a clear feminine voice, as Sira stepped out from the shelter of a buttress some dozen feet away, "—the girl took advantage of your preoccupation to relieve you of your neuros. As you see I have two of them in my hand. The rest of them are over by that wall. No! Don't try to rush! You are welcome to your swords, but they are useless here."

CHAPTER XII

"He Must Be a Man of Earth"

FRIEND and foe looked stupefied. But they were used to the give and take of battle. That this girl should disarm a detachment of soldiers while they and their own men were absorbed in such a common thing as a fight struck them as humorous. They laughed.

"This is a better break them we deserve," Sime said, grinning with a trace of sheepishness. "Captain, you take your men across the street and hold 'em there. We're going to borrow your car. No funny stuff!" Civilians were flooding into the streets. There would soon be a mob.

"We will not," replied the captain, "try any funny stuff. Some day, my friend, I hope to open you up with my sword," he added.

"By all means," Sime agreed pleasantly. "My time is pretty well occupied, but there's no telling when I may meet you again, in my business. Good day, Captain!"

Tuman stayed at the front gate with his neuro while the others struggled through the weedy garden to the police ship in the alley, rejoining them as they were ready to rise.

A CROWD had gathered. If they wondered at the appearance of these ragged, scarred and bewhiskered men; at sweat and blood-covered giant Tolto; the obviously high-bred girl in the laboring man's garments, they wisely refrained from comment or action, in deference to the neuros with which the party was bristling.

Once inside and safely in the air, they had time to breathe. Murray, with a gallantry that sat ill on the scarecrow figure he was, cleared matters up a trifle.

"Princess Sira? As I thought. Princess, or Your Highness, to be formal, I am your humble and disreputable servant, Lige Murray, of the Interplanetary Flying Police. Likewise this gentleman behind the brush — Sime Hemingway. You know Tuman? You've missed something, Your Highness! And Tolto! Lucky man!"

Sira recovered quickly from her reaction following the fight. She found a first-aid kit, bandaged Tolto's wounded shoulder skilfully and quickly. She had given no sign of recognition as Sime awkwardly bowed, during Murray's introduction, but now, as Sime held a roll of bandage for her, she gave him a sidewise look, agleam with mischief.

"But I have decided to remit the punishment—the sentence I passed on you, Mr. Hemingway," she said, her sweet, child-like face innocent.

"What punishment?" Sime gasped.

"Why, the punishment of death! For kissing me that night!" she laughed, turning her back.

Murray was heading back for the government park. It was a short distance with the police car. Soon the broad grounds, with their scattered, magnificent buildings, lay below them. But the parks were strangely bare of living creatures. Here and there lay the bodies of men or women.

"Something's happened!" Murray shouted excitedly. "Look out!"

HE swerved the ship sharply. They escaped damage as an atomic bomb, unskilfully aimed, exploded far to one side.

"Funny thing, firing on a police car," Sime puzzled. "They might have got news from that detachment we grounded, but how do they know this isn't some other police or military car?"

"Those aren't soldiers," Murray decided. "There's been a riot, and some civilian's got hold of an atoprojector."

"I know what's happened!" Sira exclaimed suddenly. "Wasil — a technie—has managed to broadcast the secret session! That upset their psychology. Oh!" Her face was alight, and she threw up her arms in ecstasy. As quickly she subsided, and tears came to her eyes.

"Wasil!" she cried. "If he is dead, Mellie will never forgive me!"

"Where is this technie?" Sime asked bruskly.

"In the broadcast room. But they have probably killed him."

"Never can be sure. Head her smack for the main entrance, Murray!"

Murray threw the car into a steep dive, and the hall portal rushed up to meet them. A soldier came partially out of concealment, waved a signal. Murray paid him no heed.

They struck with a crash. The stout car crushed through the glittering doors of metal and glass, and before the fragments fell the four men were in the thick of short, sharp and decisive battle. Their neuros hissed venomously, spanged as they met opposing beams. And the princess, struggling through the wreckage, wept tears of rage as the coarse fabric of her clothing caught, entangled hopelessly, and held her.

"Something queer!" Murray said, as they halted for breath after routing what little opposition they had encountered. "Maybe it's a trap. But what an expensive trap for somebody! Where's this broadcasting plant?"

"This way!" Tuman called eagerly. "Maybe we can still save the poor fellow who turned the trick. Broadcast the secret sessions! Don't tell me that little girl isn't fit to rule!"

The heavy metal doors were open, and they hurried in. But Tolto, noting that the princess had not followed, hurried out in search for her.

SIME stumbled over a body. It had been a dark, sleek, youngish man. A jagged burn on his throat told of the needle-ray. "Who's this fellow, Murray?"

Murray glanced at the body. He smiled a brief smile of satisfaction.

"That's Scar Balta. Got what's coming to him at last. Help me with this bird; he's still alive. Cold, though!"

"Got a shot of neuro. Could this be the technie?"

Sime found a fountain of water. He filled a cup, dashed it over the still face. The shock made the man's lips move.

"Mellie, I did it!" he whispered.

"Who's Mellie?" Sime asked.

"Mellie? Seems to me the princess mentioned her name. This is her brother. He's the right guy! Take it easy, brother!"

But Wasil was able to sit up.

"I sure fooled him!" he gasped. "Mixed up the circuits. Scar Balta

sat right here while I broadcast the secret sessions, and he was watching a lot o' haywah in the control screen.

"When Wilcox got word from outside he knew he was done. He thought Scar'd double-exed him, so came here in person and gave him the needle-ray."

Despite his nausea, Wasil looked happy.

"Wilcox tried for me, but I dodged back of those frames. So he tried for me with the neuro. The mob was getting wild outside; there was—"

He could not finish. There was an explosion that shook the building to its foundations. Tolto came running in, Sira close after him:

"Joro is coming. Joro has detonated the warships. The hall guards have surrendered. The council is locked up. It can't escape!"

EVENTS were transpiring too fast for comprehension. It was several days later, on a bench in Prince Joro's palace grounds, that Sira summed it up for Sime Hemingway.

"I'm going to accept the throne!" she said. "I'm going to be a real queen. Joro has convinced me that it will be a real service to Mars. The dear old man has schemed and worked so long, so unselfishly."

"Yeh, and he wasn't afraid to fight!" Sime added admiringly. "When he came charging out of those ships with his gang of monarchists, swords flashing, it was a pretty sight to see. And when they closed in on that gang of cheap politicians! Talk about rats in a corner!"

"The prince can fight with his brains as well as with his sword," Sira submitted. "The whole thing would have been hopeless, if he hadn't invented the detonating ray that disposed of the warships. You remember those heavy explosions, shortly after we dropped in the hall, as one might say? Those were the last of them."

A silence fell between them, and Sime was now conscious of the fragile-seeming, so deceiving beauty of this Martian girl. Something had come between them, stripped away the masculine frankness that had existed during their short and dangerous time together. Perhaps it was the softly revealing drape of the thread-of-gold robe she was wearing—true queenly garb, donned by her for the first time.

"There is one requirement that Joro insists on," Sira said in a low voice.

"What's that?" asked Sime, marveling that such transparently pink fingers should handle a sword so well.

"He says that I must choose a mate, to insure the stability of the royal house."

IT seemed to Sime that this announcement gave him a pang out of all proportion.

"That should be easy," he managed. "Every Martian is crazy about you."

"He may not be a Martian. He must be a man of Earth," Sira stated firmly.

"Is that so?" Sime asked, genuinely surprised. "Why does Joro insist on that?"

"It is not Joro who insists. It is myself."

Sime found himself looking into eyes filled with shy pleading. He could not, would not, for all of the solar system, have committed the unpardonable affront of rejecting the love so frankly offered. And yet he did not know how to accept this miracle. He did it clumsily, haltingly disclosing the secret recesses of his own heart and what had transpired there since the night he had taken the knife away from her and kissed her.

A man leaped in and made some adjustments.

The Great Drought

By Capt. S. P. Meek

"IS the maneuver progressing as you wish, Dr. Bird?" asked the Chief of the Air Corps.

The famous scientist lowered his binoculars and smiled.

"Exactly, General," he replied. "They are keeping a splendid line."

"It is the greatest concentration of air force that this country has ever seen," said General Merton proudly.

With a nod, Dr. Bird raised

Another episode in Dr. Bird's extraordinary duel with the scientific wizard Saranoff.

his glasses to his eyes and resumed his steady gaze. Five thousand feet below and two miles ahead of the huge transport plane which flew the flag of the Chief of the Air Corps, a long line of airplanes stretched away to the north and to the south. Six hundred and seventy-two planes, the entire First Air Division of the United States Army, were deployed in line at hundred-yard intervals, covering a front of nearly forty miles. Fifteen hundred feet above the ground, the line roared steadily westward over Maryland at ninety miles an hour. At ten-second intervals, a puff of black dust came from a discharge tube mounted on the rear of each plane. The dust was whirled about for a moment by the exhaust, and then spread out in a thin layer, marking the path of the fleet.

"I hope the observers on the planes are keeping careful notes of the behavior of those dust clouds," said Dr. Bird after an interval of silence. "We are crossing the Chesapeake now, and things may start to happen at any moment."

"They're all on their toes, Doctor," replied General Merton. "I understood in a general way from the President that we are gathering some important meteorological data for you, but I am ignorant of just what this data is. Is it a secret?"

Dr. Bird hesitated.

"Yes," he said slowly, "it is. However, I can see no reason why this secret should not be entrusted to you. We are seeking a means of ending the great drought which has ravaged the United States for the past two years."

BEFORE General Merton had time to make a reply, his executive officer hastened forward from the radio set which was in constant communication with the units of the fleet.

"Two of the planes on the north end of the line are reporting engine trouble, sir," he said.

Dr. Bird dropped his glasses and sat bolt upright.

"What kind of engine trouble?" he demanded sharply.

"Their motors are slowing down for no explainable reason. I can't understand it."

"Are their motors made with sheet steel cylinders or with duralumin engine blocks?"

"Sheet steel."

"The devil! I hadn't foreseen this, although it was bound to happen if my theory was right. Tell them to climb! Climb all they know! Don't let them shut off their motors for any reason unless they are about to crash. Turn this ship to the north and have the pilot climb—fast!"

A nod from General Merton confirmed the doctor's orders. The line of planes kept on to the west, but the flagplane turned to the north and climbed at a sharp angle, her three motors roaring at full speed. With the aid of binoculars, the two ships in trouble could be picked out, falling gradually behind the line. They were flying so slowly that it seemed inevitable that they would lose flying speed and crash to the ground.

"More speed!" cried the doctor. "We've elevation enough!"

The altimeter stood at eight thousand feet when the pilot leveled out the flagplane and tore at full speed toward the laboring ships. The main fleet was twenty miles to the west.

THEY were almost above the point where the two planes had first began to slow down. As they winged along, the three motors of the flagplane took on a different note. It was a laboring note, pitched on a lower scale. Gradually the air-speed meter of the ship began to show a lower reading.

"Locate us on the map, Carnes!" snapped Dr. Bird.

Operative Carnes of the United States Secret Service bent over a large-scale map of Maryland, spread open on a table. With the aid of the navigating officer, he spotted on the map the point over which the plane was flying.

"There goes Burleigh's ship!" cried the executive officer.

There was a gasp from the occupants of the flagplane's cabin. Far below them, one of the crippled planes had slowed down until it had lost flying speed. Whirling like a leaf, it plunged toward the ground. Two small specks detached themselves from the falling mass. They hovered over the falling plane for an instant. Suddenly a patch of white appeared in the air, and then another. The two specks fell more slowly.

"Good work!" exclaimed General Merton. "They took to their 'chutes just in time."

"We'll be taking them in a few minutes if our motors don't pick up!" replied the executive officer.

Far below them, the doomed plane crashed to the ground. As it struck there was a blinding flash followed by vivid flames as the gasoline from the bursted tank ignited. The two members of the crew were drifting to the east as they fell. It was evident that they were in no danger.

"Where is Lightwood's plane?" asked General Merton anxiously.

"It's still aloft and making its way slowly north. He intends to try for an emergency landing at the Aberdeen Proving Ground field," replied the executive officer.

"That's where we had better head for," said Dr. Bird. "I hope that the charge on Captain Lightwood's plane discharges through the tail skid when he lands. If it doesn't, he'll be in serious danger. Follow him and we'll watch."

FIVE thousand feet below them, the crippled plane limped slowly along toward Aberdeen. It was gradually losing elevation. Two specks suddenly appeared in the air, followed by white patches as the parachutes opened. Captain Lightwood and his gunner had given up the unequal fight and taken to the air. As the ship struck the ground, again there was a blinding flash, followed by an inferno of roaring flames.

"We're not in much better shape than they were, General," said the executive officer as he came back from the control room where the pilots were heroically striving to keep their motors turning over fast enough to keep up flying speed. "We'd better get into our 'chutes."

"The Proving Ground is just ahead," said the doctor. "Can't we make it by sacrificing our elevation?"

"We're trying to do that, Doctor, but we're down to four thousand now and falling fast. Get ready to jump."

Dr. Bird buckled on the harness of the pack parachute which the executive officer offered him. The rest of the crew had hurriedly donned their packs and stood ready.

For another five minutes the plane struggled on. Suddenly a large flat expanse of open ground which had been in sight for some time, seemed to approach with uncanny rapidity.

"There's the landing field!" cried the General. "We'll make it yet!"

Lower and lower the plane sank with the landing field still too far away for comfort. The pilot leveled off as much as he dared and drove on. The motors were laboring and barely turning over at idling speed. They passed the nearer edge of the field with the flagplane barely thirty feet off the ground. In another moment the wheels touched and the plane rolled to a halt.

"Don't get out!" cried Dr. Bird.

He looked around the cabin and picked up a coil of bare antenna wire which hung near the radio set. He wrapped one end of the wire around the frame of the plane. To the other end, he attached his pack 'chute.

"Open the door!" he cried.

AS the door swung open, he threw the 'chute out toward the ground. As it touched, there was a blinding flash, followed by a report which shook the plane. A strong odor of garlic permeated the air.

"All right!" cried the doctor cheerfully. "All out for Aberdeen. The danger is past."

He set the example by jumping lightly from the plane. General Merton followed more slowly, his face white and his hands shaking.

"What was it, Doctor," he asked. "I have been flying since 1912, yet I have never seen or heard of anything like that."

"Just a heavy charge of static electricity," replied the doctor. "That was what magnetized your cylinder walls and your piston rings and slowed your motors down. It was the same thing that wrecked those two ships. Unless it leaks off, the men of some of your other ships are due to get a nasty shock when they land to-night. I discharged the charge we had collected, through a ground wire. Here comes a car, we'll go up to Colonel Wesley's office. Carnes, you have those maps?"

"Surely, Doctor."

"All right, let's go."

"But what about this ship, Doctor?" objected the General. "Can't something be done about it?"

"Certainly. I hadn't forgotten it. Have your crew stand by. I'll telephone Washington and have some men with apparatus sent right down from the Bureau of Standards. They'll have it ready for flying in the morning. We'll also have search parties sent out in cars to locate the crews of those abandoned ships and bring them in. Now let's go."

COLONEL WESLEY, the commanding officer of the Aberdeen Proving Ground, welcomed Carnes and Dr. Bird warmly.

"I'll tell you, General Merton," he said to the Chief of the Air Corps, "if you ever get up against something that is beyond all explanation, you want to get these two men working on it. They are the ones who settled that poisoning case here, you know."

"Yes, I read of that," replied the general. "I am inclined to think that they are up against something even queerer right now."

Colonel Wesley's eyes sparkled.

"Give your orders, Dr. Bird!" he cried. "Since our last experience with you, you can't give an order on this post that won't be obeyed!"

"Thank you, Colonel," said Dr. Bird warmly. "One reason why I came here was that I knew that I could count on your hearty cooperation. The first thing I want is two cars. I want them sent out to bring in the crews of two ships which were abandoned some eight miles south of here. Carnes will locate them on the map for your drivers."

"They'll be ready to start in five minutes, Doctor. What next?"

"Turn out every man and every piece of transportation you have to-morrow morning. I want the men armed. They will have to search a stretch of swamp south of here, inch by inch, until they find what I am looking for."

"They'll be ready, Doctor. Would it be indiscreet for me to ask what it's all about?"

"Not at all, Colonel. I was about to explain to General Merton when trouble started. I am searching for

the cause of the great drought which has been afflicting this country for the past two years. If I can find the cause, I hope to end it."

"Oh! I had a sneaking hope that we were in for another skirmish with that Russian chap, Saranoff, whose men started that poison here."

"I rather think we are, Colonel Wesley."

General Merton laughed.

"I'll swallow a good deal, Dr. Bird," he said, "but when you talk of an individual being responsible for the great drought, it's a little too much. A man can't control the weather, you know!"

"YET a man, or an incarnate devil—I don't know which he is—did control the weather once, as well as the sun. But for the humble efforts of two Americans, aided by a Russian girl whose brother Saranoff had murdered, he might be still controlling it."

General Merton was silent now.

"Carnes, let me have that map," went on the doctor. When the detective had unrolled a map of the United States on Colonel Wesley's table, Dr. Bird continued, pointing to the map as he spoke.

"On this map," he said, "is plotted the deficiency in rainfall for the past year, from every reporting station in the United States. These red lines divide the country into areas of equal deficiency. The area most affected, as you can see, is longer east and west, than it is north and south. It is worst in the east, in fact in this very neighborhood. Even a casual glance at the map will show you that the center of the drought area, from an intensity standpoint, lies in Maryland, a few miles south of here."

"In fact, just about where those two planes went down," added Carnes.

"Precisely, old dear. That was why we went over that section with the fleet. Now, gentlemen, note a few other things about this drought. The areas of drought follow roughly the great waterways, the Ohio and the Potomac valleys being especially affected. In other words, the drought follows the normal air currents from this point. If something were to be added to the air which would tend to prevent rain, it would in time drift, just as the drought areas have drifted."

GENERAL MERTON and Colonel Wesley bent over the map.

"I believe you're right, Doctor," admitted the general.

"Thank you. The President was convinced that I was before he placed the First Air Division under my orders. Frankly, that search was the real object of assembling the fleet. The maneuvers are a mere blind."

General Merton colored slightly.

"Now, I'll try to give you some idea of what I think is the method being used," went on the doctor, ignoring General Merton's rising color. "In the past, rain has been produced in several cases where conditions were right—that is, when the air held plenty of moisture which refused to fall—by the discharge from a plane of a cloud of positively charged dust particles. Ergo, a heavy negative charge in the air, which will absorb rather than discharge a positive charge, should tend to prevent rain from falling. I believe that a stream of negative particles is being liberated into the air near here, and allowed to drift where it will. That was my theory when I had the First Air Division equipped with those dust ejector tubes.

"I knew that if such a condition existed, the positively charged dust would be pulled down toward the

source of the negative particle stream, which must, in many ways, resemble a cathode ray. That was why I wanted the behavior of the dust clouds watched and reported. What I did not foresee was that the iron and steel parts of the plane, accumulating a heavy negative charge, would be magnetized enough to slow down the motors and eventually wreck the ships."

"We have had eight ships wrecked unexplainably within twenty miles of here, all of them to the south, during the past year," said Colonel Wesley.

"It had slipped my notice. At any rate, the behavior of the ships this afternoon showed me that my theory is correct, and that some such device exists and is in active operation. Our next task is to locate it and destroy it."

"You shall have every man on the Proving Ground!" cried Colonel Wesley.

"Thank you. General Merton, will you detach three ships from the First Air Division by radio and have them report here? I want two pursuit ships and one bomber with a rack of hundred-pound demolition bombs. All three must have duralumin cylinder blocks."

"I'll do it at once, Doctor," the general agreed.

"Thank you. Carnes, telephone Washington for me. Tell Dr. Burgess that I want Tracy, Fellows and Von Amburgh, with three more men down here by the next train. Also tell him to have Davis rig up a demagnetizer large enough to demagnetize the motors of a transport plane and bring it down here to fix up General Merton's ship. When you have finished that, get hold of Bolton and ask for a dozen secret service men. I want selected men with Haggerty in charge."

"All right, Doctor. Shall I tell Miss Andrews to come down as well?"

DR. BIRD frowned.

"Certainly not. Why should she come down here?"

"I thought she might be useful, Doctor."

"Carnes, as you know, I dislike using women because they can't control their emotions or their expressions. She would just be in the way."

"It seems to me that she saved both our lives in Russia, Doctor, and but for her, you wouldn't have come out so well in your last adventure on the Aberdeen marshes."

"She did the first through uncontrolled emotions, and the second through a flagrant disobedience of my orders. No, don't tell her to come. Tell her not to come if she asks."

Carnes turned away, but hesitated.

"Doctor, I wish you'd let me have her come down here. I didn't trust her at first when you did, but she has proved her loyalty and worth. Besides, I don't like the idea of leaving her unguarded in Washington with you and me down here, and with Haggerty coming down."

Dr. Bird looked thoughtful.

"There's something in that, Carnes," he reflected. "All right, tell her to come along, but remember, she is not in on this case. She is being brought here merely for safety, not to mix up in our work."

"Thanks, Doctor."

The detective returned in ten minutes with a worried expression.

"She wasn't in your office, Doctor," he reported.

"Who? Oh, Thelma. Where was she?"

"No one seems to know. She left yesterday afternoon and hasn't returned."

"Oh, well, since I am out of the city, I expect she decided to take a vacation. Women are always undependable. Did you get hold of the rest?"

"They'll be down at midnight, all but Davis. He'll come down in the morning."

"Good enough! Now, Colonel, if you'll have the officers who are going out to-morrow assembled, we'll divide the territory and make our plans for the search."

A WEEK later, the situation was unchanged. Secret Service operatives and soldiers from the Proving Ground had covered, foot by foot, square miles of territory south of the Proving Ground, but without result. Not a single unexplainable thing had been found. Sensitive instruments sent down from the Bureau of Standards, instruments so sensitive that they would detect an electric light burning a mile away, had yielded no results. As a final measure, General Merton had ordered a dozen planes with steel-cylindered motors to the Proving Ground and they had repeatedly crisscrossed the suspected territory, but had acquired no static charge large enough to affect them. It was evident that Saranoff's device, if it existed, had been moved, or else was not in operation.

Also, to Carnes' openly expressed and Dr. Bird's secret worry, Thelma Andrews had not returned to the Bureau of Standards. The Russian girl, formerly known as Feodrovna Androvitch, a tool and follower of Ivan Saranoff, had acted with Carnes and the doctor in their long-drawn-out fight with the arch-communist often enough to be a marked woman.

Urged by Carnes, Bolton, the head of the Secret Service, put a dozen of his best men on her trail, but they found nothing. She had disappeared as thoroughly as if the earth had opened and swallowed her up. At last, as the combing of the Aberdeen marshes yielded no results, Dr. Bird acceded to Carnes' request, and the detective left for Washington to take personal charge of the search. Dr. Bird sat alone in his quarters at the Officers' Club, futilely wracking his brains for a clue to his further procedure.

The telephone rang loudly. With a grunt, he took down the receiver.

A feminine voice spoke with a strong foreign accent.

"I vant der Herr Doktor Vogel, plees!"

"You want who? Oh, yes. Vogel—bird! This is Dr. Bird speaking."

The voice instantly lost both its foreign accent and its guttural quality.

"I thought so when you spoke, Doctor, but I wanted to make sure. This is Thelma Andrews."

"Where the devil have you been? Half the Secret Service is looking for you, including Carnes, who deserted me and is in Washington."

"HE is? I'm sorry. Listen, Doctor, it's a long story and I can't go into details now. I got a clue on the day you left. As I couldn't get in touch with you, I followed it myself. I've located Saranoff's main base in the Bush River marshes."

"You have! Where is it?"

"It's underground and you've passed over it a dozen times during the past week. It's unoccupied now and the machines are idle until your search is over. I know the way to it. If you'll join me now, we can get in and hopelessly wreck the device in a short time. To-morrow you can bring your men down here and take charge of it."

Dr. Bird's eyes glistened.

"I'll come at once, Thelma!" he cried. "Where are you?"

"I'm down on Romney Creek. Come down to the Water Impact Range below Michaelville, and I'll meet you at the wharf. You'd better come alone, because we'll have to sneak."

"Good for you!" cried the doctor. "I'll be down in an hour."

"All right, Doctor. I'll be waiting for you."

At Michaelville, Dr. Bird left his car and stepped on the scooter which ran on the narrow gauge track connecting the range house with the wharf on Romney Creek. He started it with no difficulty and it coughed away into the night. For three and a half miles, nothing broke the monotony of the trip. Dr. Bird, his hand on the throttle, kept his eyes on the twin ribbons of steel which slid along under the headlight. The road made a sharp turn and emerged from the thick wood through which it had been traveling. Hardly had the lights shot along the track in the new direction than Dr. Bird closed the throttle and applied the brakes rapidly. A heavy barricade of logs was piled across the track.

THE doctor pressed home on the brake lever until the steel shoes screamed in protest, but no brakes could bring the heavy scooter to a stop as swiftly as was needful to avoid a crash. It was still traveling at a good rate of speed when it rammed into the barricade and overturned.

Dr. Bird was thrown clear of the wrecked scooter. He landed on soft mud beside the track. As he strove to rise, the beam of a flashlight struck him in the eyes and a guttural, sneering voice spoke through the darkness.

"Don't move, Dr. Bird. It will be useless and will only lead to your early death, a thing I should regret."

"Saranoff!" cried Dr. Bird.

"I am flattered, Doctor, that you know my voice. Yes, it is I, Ivan Saranoff, the man whom you have so often foiled. You drove me from America and tried to bar the road against my return, but I only laughed at your efforts. I returned here only for one purpose, to capture you and to compass your death."

Dr. Bird rose to his feet and laughed lightly.

"You've got me, Saranoff," he said, "but the game isn't played out yet. I represent an organization which won't end with my death, you know."

A series of expletives in guttural Russian answered him. In response to a command from their leader, two men came forward and searched the doctor quickly and expertly, removing the automatic pistol which he carried under his left armpit.

"As for your organization, as you call it—*pouf!*" said the Russian scornfully. "Carnes, a brainless fool who does only as you tell him, a few half-wits in the Bureau of Standards, some of them already in my pay, and one renegade girl. She shall learn what it means to betray the Soviets and their leader."

"You'll have to catch her first," replied Dr. Bird, a sardonic grin on his face.

"I have but to snap my fingers and she will come whining back, licking my hand and imploring mercy," boasted the Russian. "Bring him along!"

TWO men approached and seized the doctor by his arms. Dr. Bird shook them off contemptuously.

"Keep your filthy paws off me!" he cried. "I know when I'm bested, and I'll come quietly, but I won't be dragged."

The man looked at their leader for orders. From behind his light, the Russian studied his opponent. He gave vent to a stream of guttural Russian. The men fell back.

"For your information, Doctor," he said in a sneering tone, "I have told my men to follow you closely,

gun in hand. At the slightest sign of hesitation, or at the first attempt to escape, they will fire. They are excellent shots."

"Lead on, Saranoff," was Dr. Bird's cheery comment.

With a shrug of his shoulders, the leader of the Young Labor party turned and made his way along the track toward the wharf. Dr. Bird looked anxiously ahead as they approached, fearing that Feodrovna Androvitch would be discerned in her hiding place. Saranoff correctly interpreted his gaze.

"Does der Herr Doktor Vogel eggspect somevun?" he asked in the voice which had first come over Dr. Bird's telephone. The doctor started and the Russian went on in the voice of the doctor's secretary. "I'm so glad you came, Dr. Bird. I am going to take you directly to the main base of our dearly beloved friend, Ivan Saranoff."

An expression that was a mixture of chagrin and relief spread over Dr. Bird's face.

"Sold, by thunder!" he cried.

The Russian laughed sardonically and tramped on in silence. Tied to the Romney Creek wharf was a boat with powerful electric motors, driven by storage batteries. At a nudge from his captors, Dr. Bird took his place in the craft. It glided silently away down the creek toward the Chesapeake's mouth.

IN the bay, the boat veered to the south and ran along the shore until the mouth of Bush River opened before them. It turned west up the river, coming to a halt at one of the occasional bits of high ground which bordered the river.

"We get off here, Doctor," said Saranoff. "My base, which you have wasted so much time seeking, lies within a hundred yards of this point. Before I take you there, you may be interested in watching us conceal our boat."

Before the doctor's surprised gaze, the edges of a huge box rose above the surface of the water, around the electric boat. The boat was raised and water could be heard running out of the box which held it. When the box was drained, a man leaped in and made some adjustments. A cover, hinged on one side, swung over and closed the box tightly with the boat inside. Men closed clamps which held it in position. As they sprang to shore, the box sank silently out of sight below the surface of the water.

"It is now beneath a foot of mud, Doctor," laughed the Russian, "and there is nothing to lead a searching party to suspect its existence. Now I will take you to my base."

He led the way for a hundred yards over the ground. Before them loomed an old abandoned fisherman's shack. They entered to find merely a barren room. The Russian stepped to the far side and manipulated a hidden lever. Half of the floor slid to one side, disclosing a flight of steps leading down into Stygian darkness.

Flashlight in hand, Saranoff descended, Dr. Bird following closely on his heels. They went down twenty-one steps before the stairs came to an end. Above them, the floor could be heard closing. There was a sharp click and the cavern was flooded with light.

DR. BIRD looked around him with keen interest. Before him stood a static generator of gigantic proportions and of a totally unfamiliar design. Attached to it was an elliptic reflector of silvery metal, from which rose a short, stubby projector tube.

"I suppose, Dr. Saranoff—" began Dr. Bird.

"*Ivan* Saranoff, if you please, Doctor," interrupted the Russian. "I have renounced the trumpery distinctions of your bourgeois

civilization as far as I am concerned."

"I suppose, Ivan Saranoff," said Dr. Bird obligingly, "that this is the apparatus with which you send out a stream of negative particles."

"It is, Doctor. I had no idea that the nature of it would ever be discovered; at least, not until I had changed the United States to a second Sahara desert. I reckoned without you. In point of fact, at the time that I built this device and started it in operation, I had not clashed with you. Now, I know that my plan is a failure. You have left data on which other men can work, have you not?"

"Surely."

"I would not have believed you had you said otherwise," replied the Russian with a sigh. "Yet, this device has done much good. Now it shall be destroyed. It has not been a failure, for its destruction will accomplish both yours and that of your friend, Carnes."

"You haven't caught Carnes yet."

"That is easy. The same bait which caught you has caught him even more easily. I have a real sense of humor, Doctor, and before I went out of my way to bring you here, my plans were carefully laid. Mr. Carnes is now on his way here from Washington, lured by my voice. He is rushing, he thinks, to your rescue."

"What—"

Dr. Bird was suddenly silent.

"I AM glad you comprehend my plan so readily, Doctor. Yes, indeed, Mr. Carnes knows that I have captured you. He knows the exact location of this cavern and, more important, he knows the location of the power line which feeds my device when it is in operation. He also knows that there is stored in this cavern, fifty pounds of radite, your ultra-explosive. He knows that you are chained close to the explosive and that it is rigged with a detonator, connected with the power line. In only one thing is he in error.

"He thinks, that if he can sever the power line before he attempts to penetrate the cavern, that the charge will be rendered harmless, and that you will be safe. In point of fact, the charge is set with an interrupter detonator which will explode as soon as the power line is severed. It pleases my sense of humor that it will be the hand of your faithful friend, Carnes, that will send you in fragments to eternity."

Beads of sweat shone on Dr. Bird's head as the Russian finished his speech, but his expression of amused interest did not change. Neither did his voice, when he spoke, betray any nervousness.

"And I presume that Carnes is also to be blown into bits by the explosion?" he asked.

"No, indeed, Doctor, that would frustrate one of the most humorous angles of the whole affair. He will cut the line at the base of a large rock, some two hundred yards from here, far enough away that he will not be seriously injured by the force of the explosion. Thus he will witness the explosion and realize what he has done. In order to be sure that he knows, as soon as he cuts the wire, my men will capture him. I, personally, will tell him of it. I wish to see his face when he realizes what he has unwittingly done."

"Then, I presume, you'll kill him?"

"I doubt it. I rather think I'll let him live. He should be useful to me."

"Carnes will never work for you!"

"With Feodrovna in my power, I rather think that Mr. Carnes will be an efficient and loyal servant. If not, he shall have the pleasure of watching me wreak my vengence

on her before he, himself, takes his last long trip."

"SARANOFF," said Dr. Bird in a level voice, his piercing eyes boring straight into the Russian's, "I will remember this. Later, when you grovel at my feet and beg for mercy, it will be my friend, Operative Carnes, who will read your doom to you and choose the manner of it. I can promise you that your death will not be an easy one."

The Russian laughed, albeit the laugh had more of uneasiness than humor in it.

"When you have me in your power, Doctor, you may do as you like," he said, "but I do not fear dead men. In another two hours, you will be among the dead."

He turned to the three Russians who stood behind him.

"Seize him!" he cried.

The Russians leaped forward, but Dr. Bird was not caught napping. The first one went down like a felled tree before the doctor's fist. The other two came in cautiously. Dr. Bird sprang forward, feinting. As he leaped back, his foot struck a rod which Ivan Saranoff had thrust behind him. He staggered and fell. Before he could recover his balance, the two burly Russians were on him.

Even then, they had no easy task. Dr. Bird weighed over two hundred and there was not an ounce of fat or surplus flesh on him. First one, and then the other, of the Russians was thrown off him, but they returned to the attack, unsubdued by the crashing blows which the doctor landed on their faces and heads.

Gradually their ardor began to evaporate. With a sudden effort, Dr. Bird strove to regain his feet. A crash as of all the thunders of the universe sounded in his ears, and flashes of vivid light played before his eyes. He felt himself falling down . . . down. . . .

HE recovered consciousness to find his feet shackled and fastened to rings set in the concrete of the cavern wall. His head throbbed horribly. He raised his hands and found a huge bump on his head, from which thickened blood trickled sluggishly down his cheek. The cavern was flooded with light. On the wall before him, a clock told off the seconds with a metallic tick. He bent down and examined his shackles.

"I'm afraid you can't unfasten them, Doctor," said a sardonic voice.

He looked up to see Saranoff.

"I'm sorry I had to hit you so hard," went on the Russian. "Your half hour of unconsciousness has lessened by that much the time which is yours to indulge in an agony of apprehension. Look."

Dr. Bird's gaze followed the Russian's finger. On the floor, twenty feet from where he was shackled, stood a yellow can with the mark of the Bureau of Standards on its side. He recognized it at once as a radite container, a can of the terrible ultra-explosive which he himself had perfected. He shuddered at the thought of the havoc which its detonation would cause.

"Yes, Doctor, that is a can of radite," said the Russian. "Allow me also to call your attention to the interrupter fuse which is attached to it. When Mr. Carnes cuts the wire outside, you know well enough what will happen. Now, let me invite your attention to the clock on the wall before you. Mr. Carnes arrived at the Bush River station of the P. B. and W. at 2:15 A.M. He had a little trouble getting a boat, but he is now on his way here. It is 2:25. I think he will arrive between 3:30 and 4:00. Perhaps five minutes later, he will find the wire.

"You have a little over an hour in which to contemplate your total extinction, an extinction which will remove from my path the one great obstacle to my domination of the world. I hope you will enjoy your remaining moments. In order to help you to enjoy them, and to realize the futility of human endeavor, I have placed the key of your shackles on the floor here in plain sight, but, alas, out of your reach. I would like to stay and watch your struggle, to see the self-control on which you pride yourself vanish, and to watch you whimper and pray for the mercy you would not find; but I am deprived of that pleasure. I must take personal charge of my men to be sure that there is no slip. Good-by, Doctor, we will never meet again, I fear."

"WE will meet again, Saranoff," said Dr. Bird in even tones of cold ferocity which made even Saranoff shiver. "We will meet again, and when *you* whimper and beg for mercy, remember this moment!"

The Russian started forward with an oath, his hand raised to strike. He recovered himself and essayed a sickly smile.

"I will remember, Doctor," he said in a voice which, despite himself, had a tremor of fear in it. "I will remember—*when* we meet again."

He ran lightly up the stairs and Dr. Bird heard the floor close above him. With a grunt, he bent down and examined his shackles closely. They were tight fitting and made of hardened steel. A cursory examination showed the doctor that he could neither force them nor slip them. He turned his attention to the key which Saranoff had pointed out. It lay on the floor, about ten feet, as nearly as he could judge, from where he stood.

He knelt and then stretched himself out at full length on the floor. By straining to the uttermost, his groping fingers were still six inches from the key. Saranoff had calculated the distance well.

Convinced that he could not reach the key by any effort of stretching, Dr. Bird wasted none of his precious time in vain regrets or in useless efforts to accomplish the impossible. He rose to his feet and calmly took stock of the room, searching for other means of freeing himself. The shackles themselves offered no hope. He searched his pockets. The search yielded a pocket knife, a bunch of keys, a flashlight, a handkerchief, a handful of loose change, and a wallet. He examined the miscellany thoughtfully.

A LIGHT broke over his face. He tied one end of the handkerchief to the knife and again took a prone position on the floor. Cautiously he tossed the knife out before him. It fell to one side of the key. He drew it back and tried again. The knife fell beyond the key. Slowly he drew it back toward him by the handkerchief. When it reached his hand, he saw to his joy, that the key was a good inch nearer. With a lighter heart, he tried again.

His toss was good. The knife fell over the key, and again he drew it to him. To his disgust, the key had not moved. Again and again he tried it, but the knife slid over the key without moving it. He looked more carefully and saw that the key was caught on an obstruction in the flooring.

With careful aim, he threw his knife so as to drive the key further away. He threw the knife again and tried to draw the key to him from its new position. It came readily until it reached the inequality in the floor which had stopped

it the first time. All of his efforts to draw it nearer were fruitless. He gave vent to a muttered oath as he looked at the clock. Thirty minutes of his time had gone.

A second time he knocked the key away and strove to draw it to him with no success. The clock bore witness to the fact that another ten minutes had been wasted. He rose to his feet and carefully surveyed his surroundings.

A cry of joy burst from his lips. On the floor was a tiny metallic thread which he knew for a wire. He bent down and picked it up. It was fine and very flexible. He doubled it three times and strove to bend a hook in it. The wire was too short to offer much hope, but he threw himself prone and began to fish for the key.

The wire reached it readily enough, but it did not have rigidity enough to pull the key over the little bump which held it. A glance at the clock threw him into an agony of despair. A full hour had passed since Saranoff had left him. Carnes might even now be walking into the trap which had been laid for him.

He rose to his feet and thought rapidly, twisting the wire idly around the knife as he did so. He glanced at the work of his hands, and an oath broke from his lips.

"Fool!" he exclaimed. "I deserve to die! The means for liberation were in my hands all the time."

WITH feverish activity, he ripped open the flashlight. He held the two ends of the wire against the terminals of the light battery and touched the knife to his steel key ring. To his joy, the ring adhered to the knife. Under the influence of the battery, the wire-rapped knife had become a small electromagnet.

In a moment the doctor was prone on the floor. He tossed the knife out to the key. His aim was good and it fell directly beyond. With trembling hands he drew the knife toward him. It reached the key. Scarcely daring to breathe, he pulled it closer. The key had risen over the ridge which had held it, and was adhering to the knife. In another moment, he stood erect, freed from the shackles which had bound him.

He made for the door at a run, but a sudden thought stopped him. The clock showed him that an hour and twenty minutes had passed.

"Carnes must be nearly here!" he cried. "If I go blundering out, I'm liable to run right into the trap they have laid for him, and then we're both gone. If I yell to warn him, the fool will come ahead at full tilt. What the dickens can I do?"

His gaze fell on the can of radite. The wires leading to the interrupter fuse gleamed a dull gold with a malign significance.

"If Carnes and I are both washed out, there will be only Thelma left. She can't fight Saranoff alone. Carnes knows the man and his methods. There is only one way that I can see to warn him out of the trap."

He shuddered a moment. With a steady step he walked across the cave to the can of deadly explosive. A pair of pliers lay on a nearby bench. He picked them up. He dashed his hand across his face for a moment, but looked up with steady eyes. With hands that did not tremble, he bent down over the can. With a quick snip, he severed the wires leading to the can of radite.

OPERATIVE CARNES jumped ashore as the boat reached the bank of Bush River. Before him stretched a dismal swamp, interspersed with occasional bits of higher ground. He looked back

over the river for a moment, taking his bearings with great care. A luminous lensatic compass gave him the orientation of the points he had chosen for markers.

"Are you sure we are at the right place?" he asked in an undertone.

"Sure as shootin', Mister," replied the boatman. "It's the only place of its kind in five miles. The rock you're hunting for is about a hundred rods due east."

"It looks right," said Carnes. "Come on, men."

Operatives Haggerty and Dillon scrambled out of the boat and stood by his side.

"Follow me," said Carnes in a whisper.

Both detectives nodded silently. They drew their pistols and fell in behind their leader. Keeping his direction with the aid of his compass, Carnes led the way forward, counting his steps. At five hundred he paused.

"It should be right here," he whispered.

Haggerty pointed in silence. In the starlight, a large rock loomed up a few yards away. With an exclamation of satisfaction, Carnes led the way to it.

"Dig on the south side," he whispered, "and hurry! The damned thing is due to go off in less than twenty minutes. Unless we can find and cut the wire before then, the doctor is a gone gosling."

The two detectives drew intrenching shovels from their pockets and dug feverishly. For five minutes they labored. Dillon gave an exclamation.

"Here it is, Chief!" he said.

Carnes bent down and ventured a short flash from a carefully guarded light. The detective's shovel had unearthed a powerful cable running through the earth.

"Get something to cut on!" cried Carnes.

Haggerty lifted a rock which they had unearthed and thrown to one side. Carnes raised the cable and laid it on the rock.

"Now for your ax, Dillon!" he exclaimed.

He turned on his flashlight. Dillon raised a hand-ax and took careful aim. Sparks flew as the ax fell on the rock, severing the cable cleanly. Carnes rose to his feet.

"The doctor's safe!" he cried.

HE started at a run toward the north. He had gone only a few feet when a beam of light flashed across the marsh, picking him out of the darkness. He paused in amazement.

A flash of orange light stabbed the darkness and a heavy pistol bullet sang past his head. The detective raised his weapon to reply, but three more flashes from the darkness were followed by the vicious cracks of large caliber automatics.

"Down, Chief!" cried Haggerty.

Carnes dropped to the ground, the beam of light following his movements. Four more flashes came from the darkness. Mud was thrown up into his face. Dillon's gun joined Haggerty's in barking defiance into the night.

A groan came from Haggerty.

"Hit, Tom?" asked Carnes anxiously.

"A little, but don't let that bother you. Get that damned light!"

He fired again, groaning as he did so. There was a crash from over the marsh and the light went out.

"Good work, Tom!" cried Carnes.

He raised his pistol and fired again and again into the darkness, from which still came the flashes of orange light. A cry of pain rewarded him.

"Come on, men, rush them!" he cried.

He jumped to his feet and dashed

forward. A fresh beam of light stabbed a path through the darkness. A volley of fire came from behind it. Haggerty stumbled and fell.

"They've got me, Chief!" he cried faintly.

Disregarding the storm of bullets, Carnes charged ahead, Dillon at his heels. A sudden shout came from his left. A fresh beam of light made a path through the darkness and Carnes could see his opponents lying prone on the marsh. A cry of dismay came from them. Carnes fired again as he rushed forward. The men leaped to their feet and fled away into the darkness.

"Your light, Dillon!" he cried.

Dillon's light shone out and picked up one of the fleeing figures. The beam from the left was centered on another.

"Halt!" came a stern voice from behind the light. "You are surrounded! If I give the word to fire, you are dead men!"

"Dr. Bird!" cried Carnes in amazement.

THE fleeing man in the beam of Dillon's light paused.

"Drop your gun!" cried Carnes sharply.

There was a moment of hesitation before the man's gun fell and his hands went up.

"Get him, Carnes!" came Dr. Bird's voice. "I've got another one held out here. I hope one of them is the man we want."

As Dillon slipped handcuffs on his prisoner, Dr. Bird came forward, driving another Russian before him. In his hand was a piece of iron pipe.

"Cuff him, Carnes!" he said.

The detective slipped handcuffs on the man while Dr. Bird bent down and examined the face of each of the prisoners with his light. He straightened up with an exclamation of anger.

"These are nothing but tools," he said bitterly. "We had the arch-conspirator himself in our hands and let him escape."

"The arch-conspirator!" gasped Carnes. "You don't mean Saranoff?"

"Yes, Ivan Saranoff. He was here on this marsh to-night. There were four of his men and we got two, letting the most important one get away."

"You've got four, Dr. Bird," said a guttural voice from the dark.

Dr. Bird whirled around and shot out the beam of his light. A third Russian was revealed in its gleam.

"Hands up!" cried the doctor.

"I'm willing to be captured, Doctor," said the Russian. "Your search for Saranoff is useless. He has been gone for an hour. He is not one to risk his own skin when others will risk theirs for him. He fled after he left the cave."

"Do you know where he has gone?"

"I wish I did, Doctor. If I knew, we'd soon have him, I hope."

The Russian's voice had changed entirely. Gone were the heavy guttural tones. In their place was a rich, rather throaty contralto. Carnes gave a cry of astonishment and turned his light on the prisoner.

"Thelma!" he gasped.

THE Russian smiled.

"Surely, Mr. Carnes," she said. "Congratulations on your acumen. Dr. Bird saw me for half an hour this evening, but he didn't recognize me. He even knocked me out with his fist back in the cavern."

"The devil I did!" gasped the doctor. "What were you doing there?"

"Helping Saranoff capture you, Doctor," she replied. "The day you left, I saw one of his men on the street. I dared not summon help lest he should escape, so I followed him. I captured him and learned

from him the location of the gang headquarters.

"I disguised myself and took his place for a week, fooling them all, even Saranoff himself. I was one of those chosen to carry out your capture and your murder. This afternoon, unknown to Saranoff, I tampered with that radite can and removed the fuse. That was why there was no explosion when Mr. Carnes cut the wire. I had no chance to warn him. I managed to shoot one of Saranoff's men when they broke and ran."

Her voice trembled in the darkness.

"I hated to kill him—" she said with a half sob.

A faint hail came from the night.

"Haggerty!" cried Carnes.

"All right, Chief," came Dillon's voice. "He's got a bullet in his shoulder and one through his leg, but no bones broken. He'll be all right."

Carnes turned again to the girl.

"What about that Russian whose place you took?" he asked. "Maybe we can pump something out of him."

Thelma swayed for a moment.

"Don't, Mr. Carnes," she cried, her voice rising almost to a shriek. "Don't make me think of it! I—I had to—to stab him!"

She swayed again. Carnes started toward her, his arms outstretched. Dr. Bird's voice stopped him.

"Miss Andrews," said the doctor sternly, "you know that I demand control of the emotions from all my subordinates. You are crying like a hysterical schoolgirl. Unless you can learn to control your feelings instead of giving way to them on every occasion, I will have to dispense with your further services."

The girl swayed toward him for a moment, a look of pain in her eyes. She shuddered and then recovered herself. She straightened up and faced Dr. Bird boldly.

"Yes, Doctor," came in level expressionless tones from her lips.

Forty-nine Hours to the Moon

THE North German Lloyd liner *Columbus* arrived recently driving across the Atlantic through comparatively calm seas for the fastest crossing she has ever made, 6 days, 6 hours and 30 minutes. This all may have been done to provide a working idea for Robert Esnault-Pelterie, French scientist, a pioneer in aviation and now a pioneer in traveling by rocket.

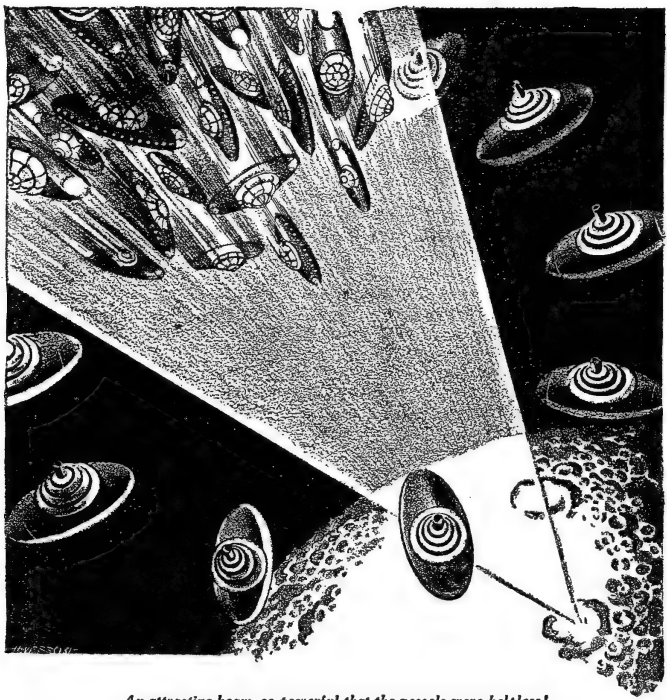
On the rocket business he has drawn some detailed theoretical plans that include among other things a possible voyage to the moon. In theory, he said, this project seems quite possible. It depends upon future mathematical developments in "astronautical" navigation and upon the perfection of mechanical details in the rockets.

No new principle is involved, he said, in the development of a rocket that might be built and travel to the moon. It all seems to hang upon the material used for the explosive quality of the rocket and the speed at which the exploded gasses emerge from the rear of the rocket.

Based on his theoretical calculations, Mr. Esnault-Pelterie has said that a rocket, expelling exploding gas at a rate of 6,000 feet a second, would weigh 200 tons when leaving for the moon and weigh only a ton on arrival. While experiments have shown the working ability of this theory no method has been found to build a rocket, weighing a ton, that would carry 199 tons of explosive material.

However, as soon as gasses can be expelled at the rate of 12,000 feet a second the problem can be solved practically. For such a speed the ratio between the initial mass and the final mass drops to twenty to one. By this, a rocket which weighed 200 tons at the start would arrive weighing ten tons.

If such a rocket can be built, the voyage to the moon would take 49 hours each way. For the present, his calculations do not find it possible to land on the moon. Instead, the trajectory of the rocket would be guided by the crew and by estimating the force of gravity of the moon, slip around this force, circle the moon and return to earth.



An attractive beam, so powerful that the vessels were helpless!

Wandl, the Invader

By Ray Cummings

CONCLUSION

THE thing in the cave stared at Anita and me as we clung together in the darkness, transfixed for a moment by horror. The distended head, ghastly of face with its green, glowing eyes, wobbled upon a long, spindly neck. The eyes seemed luminous of their own internal light; the radiance from them lighted the black cave very faintly, but enough so that I could see the thing's tawny, hairy body—long and sleek and of the size of an Earth leopard. A muscled body, with ponderable weight! It was moving toward us, padding on the rocks.

In the shadow of the moon, Wandl's space fleet meets the armada of the three allied worlds in final, titanic battle.

I recovered my wits and shoved Anita behind me. I crouched on one knee. There

was no escape; nowhere to run. This tunnel was blocked by a fallen rock mass behind us, with the wild storm raging outside. The thing was some twenty feet away, where the tunnel broadened into a black cave of unknown size. Beside me the bodies of the stricken Snap and Venza lay inert, and the still unconscious Molo with them.

I was unarmed. There was nothing to do, save crouch here and protect Anita. I waved my arms. I shouted above the outside surge of the storm; my voice reverberated with a muffled roar in this subterranean darkness.

"Get back! Back! Keep away from me!"

It stopped. Round ears stood up from the bloated head. Then it laughed again—a horrible, insane, chattering laugh! I felt Anita shoving a rock at my hand—a gray chunk of rock the size of my head.

"Its face, Gregg! Aim for its face!"

But the rock felt like a ball of cork! I flung it and hit the thing on the body. Its laughter suddenly checked. It crouched, as though gathering for a spring.

And then I thought of my gravity projector. It had a weight which seemed around a pound. If I could hit that head with it. . . .

WITLESS! These strange weapons of Wandl! I was so slow of wit in using them! If I flung the weapon, missed the thing's head, I would be unarmed indeed! Instead, I flashed on the repulsive ray to its full intensity.

The tawny body leaped. It came hurtling, but my beam met it in mid-air. For a second I thought that I had been too late. The thing was clawing the air; its momentum carried it forward, against the push of my ray. Its movement was checked before it hit the ground. It was only a few feet in front of where I crouched. I saw the membrane head, knotted and tangled with veins, with a face so gruesomely human in aspect! For an instant it hung, snarling; and then laughed that wild laugh.

The ray forced it back. It receded through the air, back across the blackness of the cave, gathering speed, until in a moment it brought up against the opposite wall some forty feet away. And there it hung pinned. I held the ray upon it. The body had struck the rocky wall; the head was uninjured. It hung there, held by my beam, five feet or so above the cave's floor. It was writhing and twisting; the cave was filled with the reverberations of its screams.

And over the screams, I heard another voice.

"Gregg! Are you here, Gregg?"

Snap! A faint, labored call from Snap! Behind me, Anita was moving sidewise toward where Snap and Venza were lying.

"Gregg! Where are you?"

The thing pinned in my light stopped its screaming, with curiosity perhaps at this new sound.

"Snap! We're here, Snap!"

Then Venza's voice: "It's—letting me talk. We're—better now."

They were recovering. Anita was bending over them.

"Gregg, they're all right now. The shock is wearing off. Thank God, Gregg! Oh, Venza, darling—"

BUT I did not dare move to them. My light on the snarling thing across the cave held it, but I could not relax my attention.

I called, "Stay with them, Anita." I moved slowly forward, holding the beam steady. The cave floor was littered with loose stones and boulders. Ten feet from the pinned animal I selected a great chunk of rock. It towered in my hand, but the weight of it was only a few pounds.

The gravity held the animal as though I had it pinned by a pole. From a distance of a few feet I heaved the boulder. The palpitating head mashed against the wall. The body and the pulp of the head and the boulder sank to the floor when I removed the beam. . . .

"Snap, thank God you've recovered! And you, Venza?"

Anita and I sat with them. It may have been that an hour passed. We began telling them what had happened; but they knew it all; they had been fully conscious. Horrible, living death! But they were out of it now, and seemingly none the worse for it.

An hour, while we crouched listening to the storm.

"It's letting up," Venza said, out of a silence.

It seemed that the howl outside was lessening. Anita was sitting over the prone form of Molo. He had stirred and mumbled several times.

"Let's see if we can get out of here," Snap suggested.

We had already searched and found no exit to the cave, save at the short tunnel-mouth where the rocks had fallen and blocked it. But to our strength, even the hugest of the rocks were movable!

"Try it now—shall we, Gregg?"

AS though we were elephants, heaving and pushing, we struggled with the litter choking the passage. There was a danger that the whole thing would cave in upon us; but we were careful. The small rocks we tossed aside like pebbles. There was one main mass, in diameter six feet or more. Together we pulled and tugged and shifted it. A little opening was disclosed, large enough for our bodies. The wind puffed in through it. Darkness was still outside.

The girls suddenly called us. "Gregg! Snap! Come quickly!"

Molo had regained consciousness. The blow from the rock had stunned him. He had an ugly scalp wound, but beyond that seemed not hurt. We bound his wrists with a portion of his belt, which we cut into strips.

"What is it you do with me? Is Wyk dead?"

"Yes."

He lay silent and sullen. I bent over him.

"Look here, Molo, we're going to get out of this, and you're going to help us. If you don't. . . ."

The knife which we had taken from him to cut his belt was in my hand. I drew its blade lightly across his throat.

"Will you talk, freely and truthfully?"

"Yes. I will talk the truth."

"Do you know where the control station is located?"

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Not far."

"The hell with that!" Snap burst out. "We're in no mood—get it meshed in your mind, Molo—no mood for talk like that. How far is the control station?"

"On Earth you would call it ten miles."

"In these mountains?"

"He told us it was," said Anita. "Underground. An entrance—I'll explain all that to you."

"Do you know where your ship is?" I persisted.

HE told us it was some thirty miles in another direction, not in the mountains, but in the outskirts of a city like Wor. It was equipped and ready for flight, all but the assembling of its crew.

Vital information! And now we had weapons! Molo was carrying several of the gravity projectors; two small searchlight beams, little hand torches; and three electronic ray-guns of short-range size.

Hope filled us. By comparison we realized how desperate and hopeless had been our plight. The storm was abating. We could creep upon the single little control room of the gravity station, where usually but two operators were on duty. The delicate mechanisms there could be wrecked. And then we would seize the *Star-Streak*. No one would be on the lookout for us. Our attack would be wholly without warning. The fact that Molo's prisoners had escaped was as yet unknown. He and Wyk had not dared tell it. Meka was back there, waiting. Our absence from the globe-dwelling might have been discovered; but Meka would say that we were with Molo and Wyk. She was waiting there, hoping that her brother and Wyk would recapture and bring us back. The storm, too, would bring confusion everywhere, aiding our movements.

All this we dragged piecemeal from Molo. Triumph swept us. We were helpless no longer!

Snap and I shared the gravity projectors and the little electronic guns.

"Let's get started, Gregg. The storm seems finished."

It was. We found the purple-red starry night again outside. The river was lashed white with waves, but they were spent. There was only a mild warm breeze remaining.

Molo's legs were free, but his wrists were lashed behind him. I hooked an arm under his, holding him like a huge, but light, oblong bundle.

Snap called, "Ready, Gregg?"

"Yes."

Snap flashed on his gravity ray and mounted, with the girls clinging to his ankles. Then I followed, with Molo. By great arching swoops, we swung up into the frowning, tumbled mountains.

CHAPTER XX

Wreck of the Gravity Station

"THIS will be the place to land, Gregg Haljan."

We were drifting down upon a barren region of naked crags—dark, frowning rock-masses, broken and tumbled, as though by some great cataclysm of nature. Mountains upon the moon could not be more desolate of aspect.*

We landed on the rocks. The heights here had a purple-red sheen from the starlight. We had seen frequent evidence of the storm; and it showed here. Rocks were abnormally piled in drifts; smooth areas showed, where the pebbles, stones and boulders had been swept away by the wind.

Snap and the girls landed beside us. We spoke softly; none of us—not even Molo—had any knowledge of how far sound would carry in this air.

"Where is the place from here?" Snap demanded.

"Off there."

Molo spoke with docile, guarded softness. He gestured with his head

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* A considerable area of Wandl, like the forest and these mountains, was inhabited by semi-human insects and animals whose reason was unhinged. They were so fearsome, so numerous, that the humans kept away from them. There was also (this I give only as a conjecture, since Molo himself had no definite knowledge of it) an inherent aversion by the humans to killing the demented things. With science they doubtless could have exterminated them, but they did not. Was it because these insane beings were offspring of themselves? Diseased children? . . .

The Wandl control station was located here, very probably owing to some natural advantage. Electronic contact with these strange grey rocks, possibly. That also, is not known, save that we saw the huge ground-contact discs.

Demented animals roamed these mountain defiles. But they had learned to keep well back—to fear this area where the station was housed, so that the operators were not unduly bothered by them.

and shoulder. A quarter of a mile away, over these uplands, the broken land went down in a sharp depression.

"It is there. I think that from here we should go on the ground. There is no guard, and I think seldom is anyone on top."

He seemed trying to help us. He had even bargained with me.

"If I help you now—if we should be able to wreck the gravity controls—then Wandl will be helpless to navigate space, or to interfere with the rotation of Earth, Mars and Venus. The allied worlds might then defeat the Wandl ships in battle. If that happened, perhaps your governments—because of my help here—would forgive what my *Star-Streak* has done."

"Your piracy?" I said.

"Yes. I am outlawed. I might be reinstated, if you would speak the good words for me."

"Maybe," I told him.

"Maybe even they would reward me. You think so, Gregg Haljan?"

He wanted very much to be on the winning side! It suited our plans now.

"Try it and see, Molo. I'll speak plenty of good words for you."

"I will try it."

And now, as we landed on the uplands, he said, "You will do best to free my hands."

"Not us," declared Snap.

"But I am a good fighter. Something unexpected might come."

"Too good a fighter," I said. "We trust you, because we have to, Molo—but no more than we find necessary."

There were so many ways in which he could trick us! We could only guard against them by assuring him that any false move would mean his sudden death.

A SMALL recess in the rocks was near us. We put Molo there, with his hands bound, and with Anita and Venza to guard him. Venza held the electronic gun. She knew how to fire it. The girls crouched in a depression twenty feet away. They could see Molo plainly; if he moved, a flash of the bolt would kill him. He understood that; no one, hearing Venza's grim assurance, could doubt it.

It seemed a safe enough arrangement. Safe! How comparative is everything!

The girls gazed at us as we were ready to start.

"Good-by, Gregg. Good-by, Snap. Good luck."

"We won't be long; sit where you are." Snap touched Venza's shoulder for his good-by. "Listen, Venza: Molo has already told us enough to enable us to find the ship. If he moves—tries anything—kill him! It might even be easier in the end. Remember that."

"Right," she said.

We left them. How casual a parting can be when in the stress of danger—the intentness of a stake greater than one's own life! But we hardly reasoned it. We were only eager to get to the rim of that cauldron.

A minute or two, cautiously shoving ourselves along the rocks, and we were crouching there. The cauldron was about two hundred feet broad and fifty feet deep: an irregularly circular bowl. The starlight gleamed on it, and there were dots of small artificial light. We saw a group of small metal buildings, very low and squat, like balls mashed down, flattened in a bulging disc-shape; between them were tiny skeleton towers. The towers, two or three times the height of a man, were spread at regular intervals in a hundred-foot circle, with a group of three or four in the center. There seemed some twenty or thirty of them. Taut wires connected their tops, each tower with every other, so that the

wires were a lacework above the little disc-buildings. The bottoms of the towers were grounded with electrical contacts, and every tower had a ground connection with each other by means of cables.

Far to one side, across the bowl from us, was a single globe-dwelling, with lighted windows. From its ground doorway, a narrow metal catwalk extended like a sidewalk on the ground, winding and branching among the towers and discs.

THIS was the exterior of the Wandl gravity station. For a moment we stared. It lay silent and dark, save for the starlight and the little lights on the towers. No sign of humans. Then in a moment we saw movement in the globe-dwelling. Men were there; the moving figure showed against the lighted window circles. Then a man came to the doorway, gazed at the sky and went back.

I whispered to Snap, "Where is the best entrance to the underground rooms? Molo didn't say which one."

We saw where, at several points, the winding catwalk terminated in low, dome-like kiosks, giving ingress downward. One was on our slope of the cauldron, not more than fifty feet away.

"That's the one we'll try," Snap murmured. "Wouldn't you think so? Anita said—"

He stopped suddenly. The top of the distant globe-dwelling was glowing. A little round patch there was radiant, like a lighted window. A transparent ray was coming from inside. The operators within this globe were observing the sky; training instruments upon it, no doubt.

And now he saw in the sky the third of those sword-like beams. It had probably been visible there for some time, but we had not noticed it.

"That's Venus," I murmured.

It seemed so. A blurred star, red in this atmosphere, was close above our horizon. The light-beam stood out from it, sweeping up to the zenith. It was clearer overhead, partly because of the atmosphere, and because, as it swept the zenith, it was passing within a few million miles of us.

The gravity station here was about to make contact with the Venus beam! We heard a muffled siren, a signal echoing from the subterranean control rooms. The current went into all these wires and towers and twenty-foot ground discs. The hiss and the throbbing hum of it was audible. The discs and towers were glowing; red at first, then violet; then that milky, opalescent white. The overhead wire-aerials were snapping with a myriad tiny jumping sparks.

I SAW now that the top of each tower was a grid of radiant wires—a six-foot circular projector with a mirror reflector close beneath it and a series of prisms and lenses just above. It all glowed opalescent in a moment; a dazzling glare.

Then the tower tops were swinging. The light from them now had reached the intensity of an upflung beam, and the projectors were swinging to focus the beam inward. The focal point seemed about a thousand feet overhead. All the beams merged there; and, guided by the towers directly underneath, a single shaft was standing into the sky.

The entire cauldron depression was now a blinding mass of opalescent light. We could see nothing but the milk-white inferno of glare. It painted the rocks up here on the rim so that we shrank back, shaded our eyes and gazed into the sky. And from the cauldron, the hum and hiss of the current, the

snapping of sparks, were all lost in a wild electrical screaming turmoil.

Overhead, we saw the Wandl beam from Venus.* Again, for a moment of the contact, there was that bursting light in the sky.

The contact with the Venus beam lasted a minute or two. Snap and I, on the cauldron rim, were engulfed in the blaze of reflected light and the wild scream of sound.

Then presently the turmoil subsided. The contact in the sky was broken. The tow-rope of Venus jerked itself away. But on the next Venus rotation it would be attacked again!

Another few minutes passed. The little circular depression beneath us was dim and silent as we had first seen it. Figures were moving within the dwelling structure. From several of the underground entrances figures came up: the ten-foot insect-like shapes of workers. Three or four of the brains came bouncing up, moving along the ground catwalk with little leaps.

All the figures entered the distant main dwelling house. The contact was over.

"Probably hardly anyone left down below," Snap whispered. "Now's our chance."

"If we can get into that opening without being seen. . . ."

"Shadows—down the rocks to the left. Damnation, Gregg, we can make it in one calculated leap!"

"I'll try it first. I'll get in and wait for you."

"Right."

We each had a gravity cylinder at our belt and a ray-gun in our hand. The slope of the depression was dim here, merely starlit; it was a steep, broken, and fairly shadowed descent some fifty feet to the little dome-like kiosk which marked the nearest subterranean entrance. I went down it with a swoop, landed in a heap beside the kiosk and ducked into it. Instinct made me fear a guard, but reason told me none would be here; there was only the danger of encountering someone coming up.

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* A full analysis of what our Earth scientists now believe were the nature and the operation of the Wandl gravity controls would occupy far more space than I have here available. Yet an understanding of the fundamental principles will be advantageous to readers of this narrative. Gravity is like electricity, like all electronization—what it does is understood; science knows in a measure how to control it—and yet the nature of the thing itself remains inexplicable. It is a force; an energy latent to all material bodies. That it is electrical in character—a force created by the movement of electrons—that much is now generally recognized.

The Wandl control station sent out a beam which I have variously termed the "opalescent beam," the "gravity ray." We met it in several forms, as I have described. They differed in size, from the hand projectors to this giant beam of the control station, but all were fundamentally the same. It was, in effect, electronized light, carrying either a positive gravitational attraction or the negative reverse, repulsion.

But how? Why, over millions of miles, did it exert this force? Why does our Sun, over millions of miles, attract our Earth? Those are questions about which very much has been written but very little is understood. There is, there must be, some intangible connection between, let us say, the Earth and the Sun; something, call it ether if you like, through which the force of gravity operates.

The Wandl beam was a more tangible connection than that. It was, for analogy, like a stream of electrified water, striking a distant object and giving an electrical shock.

This Wandl control station had two functions: The control of the planet's movements—i. e., its axial rotation and its orbital flight—and its ability to apply gravitational force to other celestial bodies.

Wandl controlled her own movements by applying gravity force, attraction and repulsion, to all the celestial star-field; and doubtless also by applying the repulsive beam tangentally against the ether like rocket streams. In this respect the planet was operated not unlike one of our familiar space-ships; in effect it was itself a gigantic globular vehicle. An infinite variety of scientific devices must have come into play to make this practical. Even the crudest of our interplanetary freighters employs scores of mechanical principles in its detailed operation. I have touched upon some of Wandl's needs: equalization of surface temperature; avoidance of natural disturbance,

I WAS at the top of a winding, descending passage, a step-terraced floor; there were occasional lights in the ceiling. In a moment Snap joined me.

"Got here! I wonder how far down it goes? If we meet anybody—"

I gripped him. "Snap, no matter what happens, do it with a rush. Keep with me; and if I shout for us to get out—"

"We go out with a rush!"

"Yes. Get back to the girls. Use your ray-gun and the gravity projector in getting back to them—and get away—without me if I fall."

"Same for you, Gregg."

We went down the deserted passage. We had had experience in movement on Wandl now; we handled ourselves more deftly. We went down several hundred feet. The passage branched, but there always seemed a main tunnel.

It was all deserted. There were distant, dimly-lighted, silent rooms. Mechanism rooms? Great factories of the strange forms of electronic gravity currents Wandl used? Some were in operation; a hum issued from them; workers moved about.

We stopped to consult. The girls, and Molo himself, had described what we would find—a main route leading to the control room where the delicate mechanisms which operated all this were centralized: the nerve center of Wandl. It seemed now that we were following that main route.

A worker came with a swimming leap past us. We dropped into a hollowed shadow at a tunnel intersection, and he went swooping by.

"Lord!" Snap murmured. "That was too close for comfort!"

AGAIN we advanced. The tunnel turned sharply. Down a short slope a glowing room was disclosed, with two or three workers moving within it. The main control room! We could not doubt it. Molo, in his enthusiasm, had once described it clearly to the girls—its great skeins of little thread-like wires spread upon the

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etc. And it is thought, also, that Wandl's atmosphere could be highly electronized and de-electronized at will, with a resulting aberration of the natural light-ray reflected from her into space; and this, properly handled, doubtless quickly checked any prolonged winds. (The aberration also caused a blurring of the image of Wandl when viewed telescopically by distant worlds. This, as I have mentioned, was one of the first puzzling things our Earth astronomers noticed when gazing at the mysterious oncoming invader.)

Most interesting to this narrative is Wandl's attempt to tow our Earth, Venus and Mars away with her into interstellar space. The Wandl gravity beam obviously had its limits of effective range. This, apparently, was some ten million miles. Wandl could have approached that close to Earth and applied the beam directly. There were, though we did not know it as we crouched on that cauldron rim, several similar cauldrons in this neighborhood. Each of them was equipped to fling a beam like this; and all were operated from the same control room, which presently we were to see. With a beam directly upon each, and using her other beams for space-movement, Wandl doubtless could have dragged us away.

But she could not get within ten million miles of Earth, Venus and Mars simultaneously! And, with the Earth rotating under her directly applied ray, its applied force would be far less; perhaps, so far as known, insufficient.

So, like a giant lever—and a tow-rope—an electronic light-stream was planted upon Earth, Venus and Mars. For simplicity, I will only consider the Earth. That light-beam, planted in Great-New York, as I have said, was inexplicable in its physical nature. But its use was obvious. As though it were a lever—a fifty million mile-long crowbar—Wandl applied her attracting force to its end! The principle of a lever needs no explanation; and an electrified beam of light carrying a gravity current from these contacting rays can readily be conceived.

With the Earth, Venus and Mars not rotating, Wandl would gather the ends of the three tow-ropes together and tow her three giant prizes away, like one vessel towing three others!—keeping them safely apart one from the other by smaller beams directed diagonally upon them!

walls — the myriad tiny opalescent discs contacted with the small gray rock surface under the tangled masses of thread-wire—the levers and dials banked on the circular tables: they were unmistakable features.

"There it is, Snap!" I whispered in his ear. "In that central rack. Those insulated rods; see them? Anita told us they used them to adjust the discs. Watch out for the current."

"But it's off now, Gregg!"

"You'd short-circuit somewhere. Keep your hands off; use the rods."

"The operators—"

He got no further. A figure lunged into us from behind! A giant worker! His largest pincer bit into my shoulder; his hollow shout resounded. The operators of the control room came with leaps at us.

There was a moment of wild confusion. Light, seemingly almost weightless bodies flapped against us; arms gripped us—but they were flimsy. The huge body-shells cracked gruesomely as we struck with our solid fists.

A moment of gruesome turmoil passed. No bolts were fired. The shouts were brief down here in the narrow confines of the tunnel. Panting, bruised more by our lunges against the rocks than by our adversaries, we ceased our wild lunges. We did not look at the scattered, broken and crushed bodies drifting now to the floor.

"Now, Snap! Hurry! Others may come!"

We lunged into the glowing control room; seized from the central rack the long insulated poles. They had a grateful feel of weight. I picked one up; jumped with a twenty-foot step to the wall.

The wires came down like cobwebs under my sweeping blows. The little discs knocked off as though they were fungus growth. Sparks flew around me; shafts of electronic radiance spat out. The wall was hissing over all its length as I ranged up and down it. The tangled, broken threads of wire writhed like living things on the floor, then crumpled, fused and turned black.

I SWEPT that wall-segment with frantic haste, lunged around and started another way. Across the room I saw Snap doing the same. A turmoil of electrical sound was reverberating around us—deafening, and the glare was blinding me. A belt-shaft shot from the wreckage under my rod. It seared my left arm. My sleeve burned off; the arm hung limp and tingling at my side. I stopped to rub it; in a moment strength came back to its muscles.

Snap was raging like a great heavy bird gone amok. Through the green fumes of electrical gases which were filling the room I saw him lunging at the circular tables, overturning them; they cracked like thin polished stone as they struck the metal floor.

I finished with the wall. There was a twenty-foot square piece of metal apparatus, ramified and intricate. I heaved it over upon its side. A thousand little mirrors and prisms, dislodged from it, came out in a splintering deluge.

I was aware of Snap fighting with a brown-shelled figure. Then he was free of it; I saw it mashed and broken at his feet as I dove past, swimming in the smoke to lunge the length of a great fluorescent tube which was still dimly glowing. My pole pried it over; it crashed with a brief puff of light and the rush of an implosion as air went into its vacuum.

I found Snap panting beside me, clinging to me in mid-air. The glare was dying around us; the turmoil of sound was lessening.

We were choking in the chemical fumes of the released, half burned gases. Turgid darkness was coming to the wrecked room, with little hissing flares spitting through it.

"Enough, Gregg. Listen! Up overhead—"

A great siren from overhead was screaming into the night.

Snap panted, "Got to get out of here; can't breathe."

Together we lunged for the tunnel by which we had entered. I stood a moment, gazing back upon the strewn and scattered room.

The delicate nerve center of Wandl! Heavy green-black gas fumes swirled in it. Darkness and silence closed down.

CHAPTER XXI

The Fight on the Star-Streak

OVER us was turmoil; the screaming siren. Then suddenly it was checked and we heard the thump and swish of what on Earth would have been called running footsteps—and shouts.

Snap shoved me. "Don't stay there, you fool!"

We lunged up the passage. Figures barred it, but they scattered. A bolt hissed at us, but missed. At the kiosk a group of workers and three or four peering little brains leaped away in terror to let us pass.

We gained the open air. With the small gravity rays darting down with repulsion upon the rocks we mounted like rockets out of the cauldron. The upper plateau lay silent in the starlight, but the cauldron behind us was ringing with the alarm, and again the danger siren was blaring.

I changed my way to attraction, swung it to the plateau rocks ahead of me. The arc of my flight was sharply bent as I went hurtling down. Over me, I saw Snap use the same tactics. I tried to aim for where we had left the girls and Molo. I could not see them down there amid the starlit crags; and suddenly a wild apprehension filled me. How had we dared leave them to Molo's trickery? The intentness of our determination to get into the station had dwarfed everything else; but with that accomplished, fear for the girls' safety was paramount.

Then, ahead and below me, I saw the slight figure of one of the girls, standing on a rock with arms outstretched to signal us. I changed my ray to repulsion barely in time to avoid crashing. The landing flung me in a heap; twenty feet away, Snap came whirling down. We picked ourselves up, saw Anita waving from the rock, and bounded to her.

THE girls were safe. Venza sat intent, with unwavering watchful gaze across the intervening space to where Molo had flattened himself against his rock, not daring to move.

"Still got him!" Venza exulted. "I say, he wasn't willing to take any chances with us. You did it, Snap?"

"I'm a motor-oiler if we didn't. Come on; got to get out of this! They're after us! We wrecked the whole damn place, Venza. Wandl's a normal planet now; no more of this accursed dislocation of Earth."*

I shoved at Snap. "No time to

* Our hope, and assumption, that we had irretrievably wrecked the entire gravity control system of Wandl, afterward was proven to be a fact. Wandl was, in effect, a normal celestial body now. The beams planted in Great-New York, Ferrok-Shahn and Grebbar still streamed across space, but there was no giant beam from Wandl to attack them.

And Wandl now could not move through space of her own volition. Like Earth, and all our other known planets, satellites, comets and asteroids, she was subject now to all the normal natural laws of celestial mechanics.

argue. You tow the girls; I'll take Molo. Got to get to the *Star-Streak.*"

I lunged over and seized Molo. "We did it! Now for your vessel! It will be ill for you if she's not where you say she is."

"She will be there, Gregg Haljan."

He docilely put himself in position for me to hook my forearm under his crossed bound wrists and carry him. Snap rose up past us, towing the girls. Over the nearby cauldron a figure mounted to gaze and see the nature of this strange attacking enemy, and then sank back.

With Molo hanging to me, I mounted with my ray, following Snap and the girls into the starlight, with the turmoil of the cauldron receding until in a moment or so it was gone behind our horizon.

We headed now, not toward Wor, whence we had come, but over at an angle to the side. Our great bounding arcs soon left the mountains behind; we crossed the river, another portion of the forest, and came over undulating lowlands.

It was a flight of under half an hour. The pursuit, if indeed anyone followed us, remained below our little segment of curving horizon. Everywhere there was evidence of the storm; the forest trees were laid flat, strewn like driftwood over one area; the river had in several places lashed over its banks. The lowlands were dotted thick with globe-dwellings. Some were hanging awry on their stems; others were rolled from their place, cracked and piled into a litter.

We kept well aloft. The surface scenes were only glimpses of wreckage, moving lights and people. And there were areas which the crazy wind had seemingly spared.

THE confusion from the storm was mingled now with the spreading alarm from the gravity station. The sound of the danger siren there was still audible behind us. As we advanced into what now seemed the outskirts of a city like Wor, with a pile of solid-looking metal structures ranging the horizon ahead, I saw a distant spaceship rise up and wing away. Wandl was proceeding with the dispatching of her space navy to oppose the distantly gathering ships of Earth, Mars and Venus. No doubt with the wrecking of the control station the masters of Wandl immediately recognized the paramount importance of the coming battle in space, and promptly sent more space-forces off, despite the storm and the excitement which the wrecked station must have spread throughout the little world.

The huge, globular, disc-like ship sailed high over us, rotating with the impulse of its rock-streams; in a moment it was lost in the stars. And then another rose and followed it.

There were many human figures in the air around us now. I mounted higher, and Snap with the girls followed me. The figures, intent

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At the moment we wrecked the gravity station Wandl's position in space was, very roughly, sixty million miles from Earth, forty million from Mars, and ninety million from Venus. This placed her somewhat outside the orbit of Mars.

She had, doubtless, at this moment when her controls were wrecked, a slow, elliptic orbital movement in the direction of our Sun; and doubtless also a very slight axial rotation. And now all the blended natural forces of the starry universe were upon her. Pulling and thrusting; seeking a balancing out of which would come her natural orbit. But it was no sudden change. No shock; no shuddering and trembling of the planet. The controls were all in neutral when we wrecked them. Wandl was being guided at that moment by natural forces. She continued so; and days, even weeks would be required before celestial path was established. But she was helpless as all the rest of our worlds now to guide herself.

upon their own tumultuous affairs, did not seem to heed us.

Molo's vessel lay alone upon a low metal cradle. No other ship was near it; but half a mile or so away on both sides we could see others resting on their stages. Lights were moving around and upon them; but the *Star-Streak* was dark and neglected.

We poised a thousand feet over her, and to one side. I saw her as a long, low, pointed vessel, dead gray in color; longer than the *Cometara,* and seemingly more narrow, but very similar of aspect.

"Meka and I are supposed to be gathering our crew," said Molo. "No one bothers with my vessel. Will you take me to Wor now, to get Meka?"

"I will not."

Snap was drifting down with the girls. They were near us. His arm waved at me with a gesture. And then came the muffled tone of his voice.

"Shall we drop down, Gregg?"

"Yes, but cautiously. Have your gun ready."

Molo protested, "I would like to take Meka with us, and a few of my crew. You will have trouble handling the *Star-Streak*—just us three men, Gregg Haljan."

"We'll take our chances."

We dropped swiftly down upon the dark and vacant stage-platform. The gray hull of the *Star-Streak* loomed beside us; her dome arched still higher; an incline catwalk went up to her opened deck-porte.

"I'll go first," I said softly to Snap. "Come quickly after me. Watch out; there might be someone on board."

VENZA still clung to her weapon. Mine was in my hand as I lifted Molo, and, ignoring the incline, bounded the thirty feet for the deck-porte. I landed safely, and stood Molo upon his feet.

"Don't you move," I admonished him sternly.

He stood docilely against the cabin wall of the superstructure. No one here. We had thought there might easily be one or two workmen on board.

Snap and the girls came sailing one after the other and landed on the deck beside me. We stood silent, alert. No one appeared from within the cabin, or from down the lengths of the deck. Venza was watching Molo, with her weapon upon him. Snap and I had planned this boarding: Anita and Venza to stay here and guard Molo. We would hastily search the ship; inspect the controls. We started for the cabin door oval.

"Gregg!"

It was all the warning Snap could give. I was within the dim cabin, but he, behind me, was still on the deck. I whirled to see a dozen dark forms leaping from the roof of the cabin superstructure. Snap was all but buried by them. These were not men of Wandl, but Molo's pirate crew — Martians, Venus and Earthmen! Snap's ray-gun spat as he went down. One of the men dropped away. I saw Venza turning with startled horror, and the huge figure of Meka leaping down upon her and Anita from the roof.

For an instant, weapon in hand, I paused in the doorway. I could not fire into the turmoil of that struggling group, so instead plunged into it, striking with my fists. Molo was shouting:

"Do not kill them! I was ordered not to kill them!"

These men, so different from the insect-like workers and the brain masters of Wandl, were solid in my grip; but we were all so weightless! I felled one; but others gripped me, pounded me. A struggling mass of bodies, arms and legs, we surged up to the super-

structure roof and dropped upon it. My weapon was gone. Half a dozen adversaries had me pinioned.

DOWN on the deck I saw that Venza had lost her weapon. Molo and Meka were clutching her. Snap was fighting with three or four antagonists. Anita was loose. She dove for the group in which Snap was struggling; hit them, kicked and bounded upward, to be seized by two of my own captors.

"Anita! Don't fight! They'll kill you!"

I tried to break loose, but four huge Martians were holding me.

"Oh, Gregg!"

There was horror in Anita's voice. Snap had broken away. At the open deck-porte he stood, as though undecided what to do. The deck was almost black around him; he was silhouetted against the outside starlight. From almost at his side, in the darkness, a tiny bolt spat upward at his head. His arms went wildly out. He tumbled backward. At the top of the boarding incline his body seemed spasmodically to kick, and the thrust whirled it down into the darkness.

The end of Snap! A pang went through me. Snap, my best friend!

Molo cursed the unknown man of his crew who had fired the shot. But none would admit who did it.

"Get to your posts," Molo roared in Martian. "Enough of you are here. Lash up the prisoners; we're launching away now." He thumped his brawny sister as she passed him. "Well played, Meka!"

These wily Martians! Molo had planned that Meka was to gather the crew and wait here at the ship for him and Wyk. If they returned with us as captives—they would return here. But if by chance things went adversely, Molo reasoned we would act just as we did; and Meka and her men were lurking here in ambush, waiting for us.

All the many various portes swung closed. Anita, Venza and I, with arms and legs bound, were taken by Molo to the forward observation and control room.

The ship was resounding with signals. The interior controls in the hull-base raised the gravity-pull within the vessel to a strength compatible to Earth. Grateful return to normality! Grateful weight and stability to our bodies!

Within a few minutes the *Star-Streak* lifted from the stage. Strange, weird Wandl fell away from us. We slid upward through the atmosphere, following one of the globular Wandl vessels, and headed into space toward where, a few million miles distant, the ships of allied Earth, Venus and Mars were gathering.

CHAPTER XXII

The Advance to Battle

"THEY are visible." Molo turned from the eyepiece of his electro-telescope. "Do you want to see them, Gregg Haljan?"

We were in the forward control and observation turret of the *Star-Streak*—Molo and his sister, Venza, Anita and myself. Unobtrusively squatting on the floor was a small, gray, rat-faced fellow, put there, weapon in hand, to watch us: a ruffian from the underworld of Grebbar, a member of the *Star-Streak's* pirate crew.

We were some ten hours out from Wandl. A group of four of the globular Wandl ships were with us, strung in a line some ten thousand miles to our left. We had been heading diagonally toward Mars. Some fifteen other Wandl vessels were ahead and others following.

We were no more than fifteen million miles from Mars when Molo sighted the allied ships.

"Will you observe them, Gregg Haljan?"

I moved to take his place at the telescope, with the gaze of Anita and Venza upon me. They sat huddled together on a low bench against the back curve of the circular turret. It was dim here, with little spots of instrument lights, and the radiance coming in the glassite plates of the enclosing dome. The loss of Snap had put a grim look upon the girls. They were dispirited; docile with Meka. They had hardly had a word with me. I think that all of us had about given up hope during those hours. Molo had consulted me several times with his policies of navigation. But I saw no chance to trick him. He was, indeed, far more experienced than I—and more skillful—in celestial mechanics. I worked with him. One never can quite give up hope. I learned the operation and the handling of the *Star-Streak,* which was not greatly different from the *Cometara* and the *Planetara.* Poor Snap! He and I had planned to capture and navigate this *Star-Streak!* We could have handled her. There were, I gathered, some ten or fifteen men aboard her now, but no more than two or three were engaged at the navigating mechanisms. Even they, for temporary periods, could be dispensed with, for the ship's controls were all automatic, handled directly from the forward turret.

I learned too, something, though not much, of the *Star-Streak's* weapons. They were similar to those of the allied ships, since Molo in equipping his pirate craft had seized upon all the best he could find of the three worlds.

THE *Star-Streak,* during this flight toward Mars, was in close communication with the Wandl craft. There was a giant vessel—Molo called it the *Wor,* and it was off to our left now—which carried the brain master in command of the Wandl forces. Molo took his orders from the *Wor,* but since his equipment and his weapons were so wholly different—and so like his enemy ships—the *Star-Streak* was set apart.

"I can do what I like," Molo had told me. "With my own judgment I can act. You shall see."

"You've had plenty of experience, Molo."

"Have I not! The terror of the starways, your worlds called me." He chuckled vain-gloriously. "I must justify it now."

"Act, do not talk," Meka commented sourly. "Children with toys make speeches like that, and then break their toys."

"Fear not, sister. Never yet has the *Star-Streak* come to grief."

And now I gazed through the electro-telescope at the waiting allied ships. They were lying some eight million miles off Mars. I gazed and saw the poised little group. There were perhaps fifty of them. The majority were Martian —long, low and very sharp-ended, and dull red in color. The wider Earth and Venus ships were silvery and drab. I could distinguish the several different types of craft in this hastily assembled fleet: many converted commercials, like my ill-starred *Cometara;* a few rakish police ships; and about a dozen of the long, narrow supermodern warships. It was their first voyage into battle. They had only been built these past few years, by peaceful governments that peacefully protested that never again would there be another war!

The little fleet was lying waiting for us; and it was being augmented by occasional others from Mars. They saw us coming now. The radiance of a Benson curvelight enveloped them, with a shaft toward us. The image of them shifted over, a million miles to one side.

Molo laughed when he saw it. "Protecting themselves already! But we are not going to attack them there!"

THE first tactics of the Wandl commanders surprised me. We swung away from the course to Mars and headed diagonally toward Earth and Venus. Earth was the nearer to us, with Venus some forty million miles beyond her. For hours we turned in that sweeping curve. Then, with our Wandl convoy following, we headed for Earth. I could not help admiring the way the *Star-Streak* was handled. She turned more sharply than the Wandl craft; and before our next meal, we were leading them all.

Would the allied ships follow us? It was almost immediately apparent that they were coming. But from their poised position, hours of attaining an adequate velocity were needed. The other allied vessels approaching from Venus and Earth checked their flight and turned after us. We passed within five or six hundred thousand miles of several of them.

I found now that some twenty other Wandl ships leaving Wandl after us had headed directly for Earth. They arrived almost at the same time as ourselves. We were all together presently—the *Star-Streak* and nearly fifty Wandl ships—gathered close to one side of the Moon. The allies—there were soon a total of about a hundred of them—were strung through space, scattered, with varying velocities and flight direction, but most of them endeavoring to get between the Moon and Earth.

This was the first day. I call it that: a routine of meals which Meka grimly served us in the turret, and a little sleep when she took the girls below and I lay on the turret floor. I wondered who was in command of this allied force, and did not learn until afterward that it was Grantline. The *Cometara* had fallen upon the Moon Apennines, not very far from where my old *Planetara* still lay, near the base of Archimedes. But Grantline and a few of his companions, with their powered suits, had struggled free from the gravity pull of the wreckage; and a few hours later, a ship out from Earth picked them up.

Grantline, on one of the Earth police ships, commanded the fleet now, and he afterward told me in detail how he endeavored to conduct his forces in the battle—thus enabling me to describe it from both viewpoints. He had been cruising toward Mars when he saw us make the turn. He though a landing upon Earth might be contemplated; and hastened all his ships into the area between the Moon and Earth to cut us off.

BUT that was what Wandl wanted, as presently we were to learn. The Wandl ships, with the *Star-Streak* among them, made a complete slow circuit of the Moon. It took another day. Molo said very little to me in explanation of the Wandl tactics, but I think it was intended to lure Grantline into following. A few of the allied ships did follow us around. But not many; the rest stayed carefully guarding the line between the Moon and Earth.

There had been no encounter yet between the hostile ships.* Wandl

* The huge distances involved in the engagement must always be kept in mind. The gravity rays from the Wandl ships were only a slight disturbing element at long distance. Grantline's Zed-rays and Benson curve-lights were defensive only. For offense, Grantline's electronic guns were of varying range, but all were from ten to two hundred miles. And up to this time none of the opposing vessels came within a thousand miles of each other.

seemed unwilling, and Grantline was cautious. He did not know what weapons these strange globular vessels would use; his only experience had been our encounter, on the *Cometara,* with the whirling discs.

Then, at the end of the second day, came the first clash. The *Star-Streak,* and all the Wandl ships, were again clustered on the Earth side of the Moon. They were hovering perhaps twenty thousand miles above its surface. Grantline's force was a hundred thousand miles off, toward Earth. One of the Wandl ships came tentatively forward, and Grantline sent one of the new-style warships to meet it.

They encircled each other. Both were cautious, but there was a passing within fifty miles. The Earth ship fired her bolts. The insulated barrage of the Wandl ship withstood them. There was a shower of ether sparks close to the ship, and a reddening of the hull, but nothing more. It seemed that the electro-barrages of the Wandl and allied ships were very similar in nature—an aura of electro-magnetism, enclosing the ship like a curtain fifty feet away, absorbed the electronic stream of the enemy bolt. The Wandl ship flung no bolts! She loosed a score of the whirling discs during the passing. They were of varying sizes, but similar to those which cut and wrecked the *Cometara.* But in this instance the Grantline ship was able to destroy each of them as it came close.

THIS was the first encounter. The Earth warship went back to its squadron and the Wandl vessel rejoined its fellows. It had fired no bolts! Grantline suspected now what afterward proved to be the fact. These Wandl vessels were not equipped with long-range electronic guns. The Wandl defensive tactics were necessary. They feared a widespread encounter. They were hovering in a compact group, of some five hundred miles area, over the Moon surface. Their purpose was not yet apparent. But Grantline saw now that one of the Wandl ships was dropping down and landing on the Moon. It skimmed the Apennines and landed not far from Archimedes.

What was that for? Grantline wondered. He noticed that the lowering, closely gathered Wandl fleet tried to mask the landing. And their gravity rays, with repulsive force, darted out to impede the Grantline vessels if they tried to advance. This Earthward hemisphere of the Moon was now largely in shadow. But Grantline's Zedray magnifiers showed the vessel on the Moon. Apparatus was being unloaded. It seemed, down there on the rocky Moon plain in the foothills of the Apennines, that some extensive, elaborate base was being prepared.

It was for this the hovering Wandl fleet was waiting—holding off from conflict until this Moon base was ready. When Grantline reached that conclusion, he ordered all his vessels forward to a general attack!

CHAPTER XXIII

The Battle in the Shadow of the Moon

DURING this time, on the *Star-Streak,* as we made with the Wandl fleet that preliminary circuit of the Moon, an incident occurred which changed everything for me—opened up the future from blank despair to tense hope. I had noticed several times as we gathered in the *Star-Streak's* forward turret, that Venza and Anita were eyeing me. Their expressions were very strange, unfathomable, furtive; but I realized that they were

trying, for some reason, to attract my attention.

We had no opportunity to speak secretly. Molo or Meka, or that rat-faced Venus guard, were always too near us. And Molo kept me busy with computations of our course. We rounded the Moon. We gathered with the Wandl fleet some twenty thousand miles above the lunar surface, and I watched that ship descend and land. Like Grantline, I wondered what for, but Molo gave me no hint. I saw, through his electro-telescopes, bloated figures in pressure suits unloading mechanisms; then they seemed to be placing huge contact-discs in a circle on the lunar rocks. It was reminiscent of the Wandl gravity station, and the contact-beam which Molo had planted in Great-New York.

Then at last the girls had an opportunity to whisper to me. A swift phrase came from Anita.

"Gregg! Snap is alive! Hiding on board!"

I gaped. Snap alive?

"He's loose! Planning to rescue us—you and he to capture the *Star-Streak!*"

"Anita! Tell me—how—"

"No more now! Our room below—he's near it. He spoke to us."

No more! She moved away from me. But it was enough! Snap alive! But I had seen him shot—and fall! But I recalled that when he fell beside the ship, no one had bothered to go down after the body, and at that time the hull-portes were open.

Renewed hope! It seemed as though all the world had opened up to us again. After a time Meka took the girls below. I sat with Molo, gazing down at the dark and gloomy surface of the Moon. I had finished the mathematical work Molo had given me. My thoughts were with Anita and Venza, down in their cabin now with Meka. Perhaps even now Snap, with a rush, was joining them.

I hardly heard Molo's low muttered curse as he set his lenses for a slight alteration of our slow circular course among the Wandl fleet.

"That fellow at my gravity-shifts acts like a nit-wit. He has them disarranged."

It snapped me to sudden alertness.

"Something wrong, Molo? Nonsense!"

"These men of my crew answer my controls too slowly. They should jump when my signals come."

THE plates suddenly shifted normally, but there had been an interval of delay. Molo was puzzled and annoyed. My heart pounded as I wondered if he would investigate, but he did not.

"You had better sleep, Haljan. Take advantage now; we shall have action presently. Did you figure our emerging curve?"

I shoved my computations across the little table at him. "There you are."

"You are quick, Haljan."

"We should emerge from the Moon shadow in about two hours with that course."

"But I won't hold it. We're staying close near here with the other vessels. But I want some velocity always. Take your sleep, Haljan."

I stretched on the narrow floor mattress. The turret was silent, save for the mechanism hum and the interior throb of the vessel. What was Snap doing? Had he already interfered with the *Star-Streak's* mechanisms?

I was aroused from a doze by Molo's activity in the turret. The girls and Meka were still below. The ever-silent Venus man, squatting in the turret corner, still had his gun upon me.

I saw that Grantline's ships, over a wide fan-shaped spread, were advancing.

And presently we were engaged in the soundless turmoil of the battle. Not by any chance can I picture more than fragments; chaotic things I saw and experienced, and intermingled, incoherent chaos, out of which the imagination may get an image of the whole giant canvas. Six or eight hours of bursting electronic light and puffs of darkness in that spread of battle area within the Moon-shadow—a strangely silent battle of crossing lights. Ships a thousand miles apart, gathering velocity with great tangental curves; passing each other in a second; sweeping a thousand miles apart again, turning and coming back. A hundred engagements.

The *Star-Streak* was very fast, very mobile, and, unlike all the other Wandl vessels, had the allies' own weapons to use against them. I saw now why they called Molo the terror of the starways!

WE swept into the shadowed battle area. Over all its thousand-mile spread were the radiant Wandl gravity-beams, disturbing and impeding the course of Grantline's ships; the luminous gleam of projectile rockets, like little comets, launched by the Wandl craft, carrying high explosives; the radiance of the rocket-streams which all the vessels were using now for close maneuvering; the glare of Grantline's searchlight bombs and his white search-beams to disclose the deadly whirling discs which the guns of his vessels must seek out and destroy. A chaos of silent light, stabbed here and there with Grantline's darkness bombs—bombs of limited local range which exploded in space and which, for a few minutes duration, absorbed all light-rays, giving a temporary effect of darkness.

And then wreckage! Broken, leprous Wandl vessels whose barrage at close range had been smashed by Grantline's guns; torn and littered allied ships, struck by the huge exploding comet-projectiles and the whirling discs; airless hulks, and scattered fragments which no longer resembled a ship at all but only a hull plate, or a torn segment of dome. And little drifting blobs—the survivors in pressure suits who had leaped from the wreckage; little blobs ignored, whirled away or drawn forward as by chance the sweeping gravity-beams fell upon them; tiny derelicts, floating storm-tossed until the Moon's attraction caught and pulled them down, or a whirling disc cut through them, or the distant aura of a bolt shocked them to a merciful death.

It was a three-dimensional, thousand-mile spread of fantasy infernal. Out of it, after an hour or two, a steady sift of every manner of wreckage was drifting down upon the Moon; the scene began to blur. A haze like glowing star-dust, or the radiance from a comet's tail, was spreading a weirdly luminous mist, blurring, obscuring the scene—no doubt the released electrons and the dissipating gases of the space guns and exploding projectiles, forming a dust in the ether, which glowed in the mingled starlight and earthlight.

THE *Star-Streak* had plunged, during those six or eight hours, through the battle area. This terror of the starways! Our several encounters were all characterized by the *Star-Streak's* extreme flexibility, her speed, mobility—and Molo's reckless skill. We came through unscathed. There is a certain advantage for the man who seems not to care for his own life!

But there was an encounter—the last one, as it chanced, just before

we emerged downward out of the ether-fog and found ourselves no more than a thousand miles above the Moon's surface—where our adversary was equally reckless and only Molo's skill and perhaps an enormity of luck saved us.

We came upon a Venus police ship. We plunged, as though seeking a collision. And the Venus ship was willing! For a moment of chaos, both barrages held against the exchange of bolts. Then we rolled over and tilted down from the impulse of the stern rockets. The passing must have been within feet—not miles. And in that second, Molo timed a shot to strike at the enemy bottom. It went through their barrage. Behind us, a second later, there was only strewn wreckage of the ship, so finely powdered that it became a silvery radiance, like moonlight shining on a little patch of fog.

"Not too bad?" Molo gazed around for appreciation. "Not bad, Gregg Haljan? Molo is not too unskilful?"

We hung now close above the Moon surface, with the battle area over us. Out of the ether-fog up there came the drifting wreckage; and now the Wandl ships were one by one coming down. Not so many of them, now! No more than ten of them emerged.

Grantline did not follow. His ships withdrew the other way. The fog gradually dispersed. Grantline could now take stock of the battle. And he had been victorious! One might call it that, since his percentage of strength, numerically, was greater now than when the battle began. Ten remaining Wandl ships—and the allies had about twenty-five.

Ghastly, hollow victory indeed! Another hour passed. Grantline's twenty-five ships were gathered in a close group, ten thousand miles above the Moon surface. Under them, the ten Wandl vessels and the *Star-Streak* seemed ranging in a five hundred-mile circle. Down through it, on the rocks of the Moon, in the foothills of the Apennines, the mechanism established there abruptly sprang into action.

IT was a giant gravity-beam! Of infinitely greater power than any Wandl vessel could generate, it flung out its spreading, conical ray.* The beam had about a hundred-foot diameter at its base on the rocks. It passed upward through the circle of Wandl vessels, and its spread bathed all of Grantline's ships at once! An attractive beam, so powerful that the vessels were helpless! Against all their efforts they were pinned and drawn downward. A slight velocity at first, but with a tremendous acceleration. Within an hour they were hurtling, coming together as they speeded down the narrowing cone of the beam. The ten thousand miles—their distance above the Moon—was cut to five thousand. The Wandl ships drew sidewise, keeping well out of range, to let them pass. In another thirty minutes they would crash against the rocks.

I gazed in horror from the *Star-Streak's* turret. We were sidewise to the angle of the beam. Grantline's ships were pulled together now into almost a fifty-mile group. They hung all askew. Helplessly pinned, some broadside, some upended. The movement of their fall was so rapid that even with the naked eye it was apparent.

* This was the ultimate purpose of all the Wandl tactics—to manipulate Grantline into his present position. This gravity-beam, though far smaller, was comparable to the one used by the Wandl control station. A rock contact against a huge mass, i. e., Wandl, and here, the Moon, was necessary to give the ray its power. No ship could generate such a ray. Hence, the Wandlites chose this battleground, where they could establish themselves upon our deserted Moon.

"Got them now!" Molo chuckled. "This is the end for them, Gregg Haljan."

There were only three of us in the turret: Molo and I, and my silent, watchful guard—a huge Martian, now, who sat cross-legged, with a ray-gun pointed at me. Meka and the two girls had been below during all the engagement. It was over now. During this lull Molo had sent the men from the deck-gun portes to their hull quarters. Our decks were empty. The bridges and catwalks up here had momentarily no occupants. The *Star-Streak* had little velocity, save a slow drift downward toward the Moon surface, which now was only a few hundred miles beneath us. The lunar disc was a great dark spread of desolation, with only the sunlight topping the distant horizon limb; and from under us, to the side, the light-point source of the giant gravity-beam. Over us were the watching Wandl vessels —and, still higher, the helpless knot of Grantline's ships hurtling down.

Silent drama of space!

"Got them now!" Molo repeated. "In another—"

HE never finished. From the open doorway of the turret a figure rose up. Snap! His aspect, even more than his appearance, transfixed me. Snap, with his clothes torn, grimy and spattered with blood; his face pale and gaunt, with blazing hollow eyes, and above it the shock of rumpled red hair! In one hand he clutched a ray-gun, and in the other a naked, blood-stained knife!

My Martian guard squatting on the floor half-turned; Snap's bolt met him before he could raise his weapon. He tumbled dead almost at my feet; and mingled with the hiss of the bolt was Snap's shout at the unarmed Molo.

"Into the corner, you! Back up, you damned traitor! Else I'll kill you like I've killed everybody else on this ship!"*

I had leaped and seized the gun, which was still in the hand of the dead Martian guard.

"Snap—the girls—"

"Down below. Free; they've got Meka bound and gagged, locked and sealed in a bunk-room. Gregg, bring them up! I'll hold this accursed traitor; no need to kill him. By the gods, I've killed enough! Gregg! What—"

He suddenly saw for the first time the vast silent drama in the firmament outside the dome windows. "Gregg, for the love of—"

"No time now, Snap! I'll get the girls."

"Watch out; I might have missed somebody down below!"

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* It was not until considerable time afterward that I had opportunity of hearing from Snap what had happened to him. Even then he was reticent about those hours when he crept about the ship, desperately prowling with his dripping knife. But I saw the members of the pirate crew, which he had encountered, one by one in the dim corridors, catwalks and bunk-rooms of the hull. That he had caused no alarm was undoubtedly owing to the turmoil of the battle.

Snap was reticent about all this, but he was characteristically triumphant over the strategy by which he had escaped capture when we boarded the *Star-Streak*. During that fight he had found himself loose, and in the shadows against the rail by the opened deck-porte. His gun was in his hand. He himself had fired what seemed to us the fatal shot! Aimed it upward past his head, from the darkness down by his leg. So unusual a thing, none of us suspected it! The aura of the bolt all but knocked him senseless; it was not difficult to pretend that gesture of flinging up his arms and tumbling backward. His wits held enough so that he kicked his body sharply downward; and in the outside darkness he shot down beside an opened hull-porte which he had seen as we came aboard. He crept into that porte; hid aboard the ship. It was he who, finding one of the control rooms vacant, had accidentally interfered with the shifting mechanisms and thus caused annoyance from Molo in the turret above. And later he was able to communicate with the girls.

He had! Three men appeared on the forward deck near the foot of our turret ladder. My bolt spat down upon them; two of them fell. The other ran aft, toward where I saw Venza and Anita appearing from the lounge doorway of the cabin superstructure. I fired again, and the running man tumbled forward on his face. He was the last of the pirate crew.

Molo was crouching, half bending forward over his instrument table, with Snap's gun upon him. The girls burst upon us. We armed them. Meka was safely fastened down below. We backed Molo to the floor in the corner, with Venza and Anita watching him.

SNAP and I were in control of the ship. For temporary periods the automatics would handle the gravity-shifters. I could operate them here from the turret. We had a downward velocity toward the Moon; five hundred miles below us, no more, was the base of that diabolical gravity ray which was so swiftly pulling the twenty-five Grantline ships to their destruction!

I gripped Snap and told him what we must do. "The forward gun on the starboard side—you can aim and fire it, Snap! With a close range; it's almost identical with our Earth guns—the Francine projectors. With a close range you can handle it, and I'll give a close mark! You can handle it."

He dashed for the deck. I set the levers. Gravity-plates with full bow attraction; stern repulsion toward the Earth; and the stern rocket-streams at highest power. The *Star-Streak* responded so smoothly! With acceleration such as only Molo's famous terror of the starways could attain, we dove for the Moon!

Breathless minutes! Those Wandl ships up in the firmament behind our stern would probably do nothing; they would not understand this sudden move of their friendly ship! The brain masters, the insect-like Wandlites down on the Moon rocks operating the mechanism of the gravity-ray, would not suspect until too late what the *Star-Streak* was doing! And it was minutes now—not hours!

Uprushing rocks—the Apennines to one side; the dark yawning maw of Archimedes on the other. We were diving parallel with the gravity-ray, now—hardly a mile from it—diving for the mechanism at its source. Twenty-thousand feet of altitude. . . . I bent our rocket-streams up for the start of our turning. Bow-hull gravity-plates next . . . ten thousand feet . . . five thousand. . . .

HOW close we went I never knew. It was seconds now, not minutes. I shifted all the controls. Our bow lifted as we straightened. The whole spreading lunar surface tilted and dipped. Snap fired! I saw the bolt flash at the tilting landscape and a puff of light down there on the rocks. And an instant later, vacant rocks where the little cluster of men and mechanisms had been! And the upflung gravity-beam was gone!

The giant towering cliffs of the mountain of Archimedes seemed to rush at our upturning bow. The great dark crater-mouth slid under our hull. But we cleared it; the maw of blackness slid down and away; the whole lunar world tilted down and dwindled as we mounted again into the starlight.

Minutes passed, while we mounted. Above our upstanding bow was a new drama. The suddenly released Grantline ships, almost level with the ten Wandl vessels when the ray vanished, turned sidewise. Desperately rushing; and the poised Wandl craft, devoid of

velocity, could not pick it up to escape. Grantline, for those minutes, ignored the frantically flung discs. A desperate mêlée, all at close quarters. . . . We saw the spitting, puffing lights and the silent turmoil, hidden presently by the spreading, rolling clouds of ether-smoke.

Then out of it came drifting the wreckage. We plunged through an end of the glowing fog, encountered nothing but two triumphant Venus vessels. With them we mounted into the upper starlight.

This was the end of the battle. The victorious Grantline ships one by one came lunging up: only twelve of them. No Wandl vessels were left. . . .

The great spreading cloud of ether-smoke drifted down like a shroud to hide the wreckage; drifted and settled to the lunar surface —a great radiant area of fog, gleaming in the earthlight.

CHAPTER XXIV

A Little Pyre in the Sunlight

THERE is very little more, pertinent to this narrative, that I need add of the events on Earth, Venus and Mars during this momentous summer. The main facts are history now: the wild storms, the damage done by outraged nature and the panics among the people—all of it has been detailed as public news. The strange light-beams planted by Wandl in Great-New York, Grebbar and Ferrok-Shahn have not yet burned themselves away; but they are lessening, and scientists say that they will soon be gone.

The changed calendars call this the New Era. The axes of the three worlds were not appreciably altered; the climates are at last restoring to normal. But the axial rotations of all three planets were slowed by that attacking Wandl beam before we wrecked the gravity station. The Earth day has been lengthened, causing the new calendar—the New Era. Our year, formerly of approximately 365¼ days, now contains, the astronomers say, but 358.7 days.

Molo and Meka have been returned to Ferrok-Shahn. They were tried there for piracy and treason, and are imprisoned.

And Wandl? With her gravity controls wrecked, Wandl became subject to the balancing celestial forces. During those succeeding months of the summer and autumn no other space-vessels appeared from her; nor did our worlds investigate. Her presence here—even a little world one-sixth the size of the Moon—was causing disturbance enough!

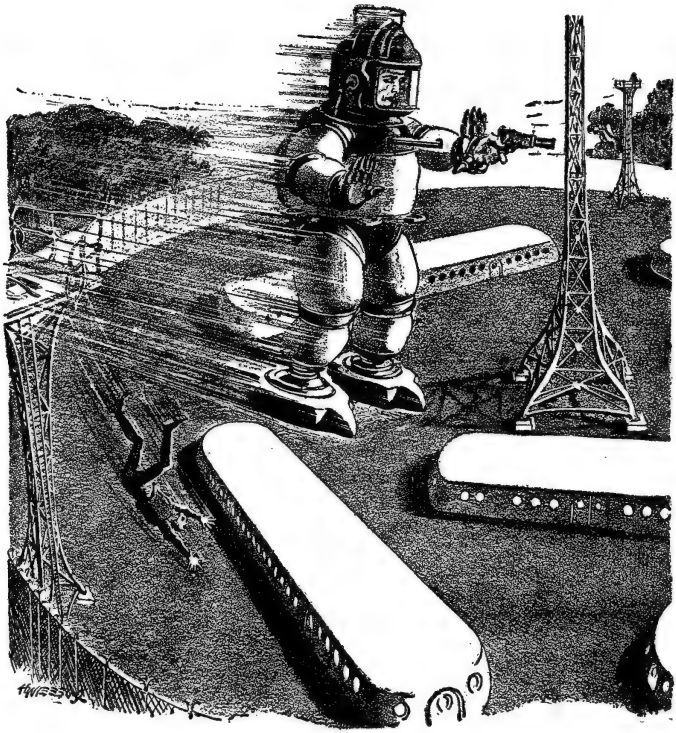
Wandl came with slow velocity, like a dallying, strangely sluggish comet about to round our Sun. What would her final orbit be? By fortunate chance she headed in, far from the Earth and Venus; missed Mercury and Vulcan by a wide margin; went close around the Sun; came out again.

But the pull of the Sun, and Mercury and Vulcan, dragged her back. Her velocity was not great enough.

I recall that late autumn afternoon when, with Anita, Snap and Venza, I sat in the observatory near Washington, gazing at Wandl through the dark glass of the solarscope. Doomed invader! She showed now as a tiny dark dot over the Sun's giant, blazing surface. This was her final plunge! The dot was presently swallowed and gone! It seemed, amid those giant, licking streamers of blazing gas, that there was an extra puff of light.

And some claim now that for a brief time our sunlight was a trifle brighter and a trifle warmer—a little pyre to mark the end of Wandl, the Invader. . . .

(The End.)



Nothing there could withstand him.

The Bluff of the Hawk

By Anthony Gilmore

HAD not old John Sewell, the historian, recognized Hawk Carse for what he was — a creator of new space - frontiers, pioneer of vast territories for commerce, molder of history through his long feud with the powerful Eurasian scientist, Ku Sui—the adventurer would doubtless have passed into oblivion like other long-forgotten spacemen. We have Sewell's industry to thank for our basic knowledge of Carse. His

"A trick? Carse was famed for them. A trap? But how?"

"Space-Frontiers of the Last Century" is a thorough work and the accepted standard, but even it had of necessity to be compressed, and many meaty episodes of the Hawk's life go almost unmentioned. For instance, Sewell gives a rough synopsis of "The Affair of the Brains,"* but dismisses its aftermath entirely, in the following fashion (Vol. II, pp. 250-251):

". . . there was only one way out: to smash the great dome covering one end of the asteroid and so release the life-sustaining air inside. Captain Carse achieved this by sending the space-ship *Scorpion* crashing through the dome unmanned, and he, Friday and Eliot Leithgow were caught up in the outrushing flood of air and catapulted into space, free of the dome and Dr. Ku Sui. Clad as they were in the latter's self-propulsive space-suits, they were quite capable of reaching Jupiter's Satellite III, only some thirty thousand miles away.

"Then, speeding through space, Captain Carse discovered why he had never been able to find the asteroid-stronghold. He could not see it! Dr. Ku Sui had protected his lair by making it invisible! But Carse was at least confident that by breaking the dome he had destroyed all life within in, including the coordinated brains.

"So ended 'The Affair of the Brains.'

"The three comrades reached Satellite III safely, where, after a few minor adventures, Captain Carse. . . ."

Sewell's ruthless surgery is most evident in that last paragraph. Of course his telescoping of the events was due to limited space; but he did wish to draw a full-length, character-revealing portrait of Hawk Carse, and with ". . . reached Satellite III safely, where, after a few minor adventures, Captain Carse. . . ." learned old John Sewell slid over one of his greatest opportunities.

The resourcefulness of Hawk Carse! In these "few minor adventures" he had but one weapon with which to joust against overwhelming odds on an apparently hopeless quest. This weapon was a space-suit — nothing more — yet so brilliantly and daringly did he wield its unique advantages that he penetrated seemingly impregnable barriers and achieved alone what another man would have required the raybatteries of a space-fleet to do.

But here is the story, heard first from Friday's lips and told and re-told down through the years on the lonely ranches of the outlying planets, of that one dark, savage night on Satellite II and of the indomitable man who winged his lone way through it. Hawk Carse! Old adventurer! Rise from your unknown star-girdled grave and live again!

THIRTY thousand miles was the gap between Dr. Ku Sui's asteroid and Satellite III, the nearest haven. Thirty thousand miles in a space-ship is about the time of a peaceful cigarro. Thirty thousand miles in a cramped awkward space-suit grow into a nightmare journey, an eternity of suffering, and they will kill a good number of those who traverse them so.

For, take away the metal bulkheads and walls, soft lights and warmth of a space-liner, get out in a small cramped space-suit, and space loses its mask of harmlessness and stands revealed as the bleak,

*See the March, 1932, issue of Astounding Stories.

unfeeling torturer it is. There is the loneliness, the sense of timelessness, the sensation of falling, and above all there is the "weightless" feeling from pressure-changes in man's blood-stream — changes sickening in effect and soon resulting in delirium. Nothing definite; no gravity; no "bottom," no "top"; merely a vacuum, comprehended by the human mind through an all-enveloping nausea, and seen in confused spectral labyrinths as the whole cold panorama of icy stars staggers and swirls and the universe goes mad. Such a trip was enough to churn the resistance of the hardiest traveler, but for Hawk Carse, Friday and Eliot Leithgow there was more. On Ku Sui's asteroid they had gone through hours of mental and physical tension without break or relaxation, and they were sleep-starved and food-starved and their brains fagged and dull. What would have been a strong reaction on land hit them, in space, with tripled force.

So Friday—our ultimate authority—remembered little of the transit. He had but short periods of wakefulness, when the recurring agony of his body woke and racked him afresh, and only during these did he see the other two grotesque figures, sometimes widely separated, sometimes close, dazzlingly half-lit by Jupiter's light. But he was conscious that one of the three was keeping them more or less together, though only later did he know that this one was Carse — Carse, who hardly slept, who drove off unconsciousness and fought through nausea to keep at his task of shepherding, failing which they would have drifted miles apart and become hopelessly separated. He was able to maintain them in a fairly compact group by his discovery of a short metal direction rod on the breast of the suit, which gave horizontal movement in the direction it was pointed when its button was pressed.

BUT though it seemed endless, the journey was not; Satellite III grew and grew. Its pale circle spread outward; dark blurs took definition; a spot of blue winked forth—the Great Briney Lake. The globe at last became concave, then, after they entered its atmosphere, convex. This last stretch was the most grueling.

Friday remembered it in vivid flashes. Time after time he dropped into confused sleep, each time to be awakened by Carse jarring into him, shouting at him through the suits' small radio sets, keeping him —and Leithgow—attentive to the job of decelerating. The man's efforts must have been terrific, taxing all his enormous driving power, for he at that time was without doubt more exhausted than they. But he succeeded, and he was a haggard-faced, feverish shell of himself when at last he had them in a dangling drunken halt in the air a hundred feet from the surface.

Primal savagery lay stretched out below, and there seemed to be no safe spot whereon to land. The foul, deep swamp that reached for miles on every side, the towering trees that sprouted their spiny trunks and limbs from it, the interlaced razor-edged vines and creeper-growths—all was a stirring welter of tropic life, life varied and voracious and untamed. From the tiny poisonous bansi insects layers deep on the nearest tree to the monster gantor that crouched in a clump of weeds, gently sawing his fangs back and forth, all the creatures of this world were against man.

Carse scanned the scene wearily. They had to land; had to sleep under normal conditions, and eat and drink, before they could go further. But where? Where was haven? He snapped out the direc-

tion rod, moved away a short distance, and then glimpsed, below and to the left, a small peninsula of firm soil which seemed safe and uninhabited. And there was a pool of fairly clear water before it, containing nothing but an old uprooted stump. He came back to the others, shook them, and led them down to the place he had discovered.

They landed with a thump which seemed to shake all life from two of them. Friday and Eliot Leithgow collapsed into inert heaps, asleep immediately. Carse extracted a ray-gun from the belt of Leithgow's suit and prepared to stand watch. But that was too much. He overestimated his capacity. He had come through thirty hours of hellish sleep-denied delirium, and he could not stave sleep off any longer. He staggered and went down, and his eyelids were glued in sleep when his body hit the ground.

But mechanically, with an instinct that sleep could not deny, his left hand kept clasped around the butt of the ray-gun. . . .

SATELLITE III's day has an average of seven hours' duration, her night of six. It was perhaps the last hour of daylight when the three metal- and fabric-clad figures lying outsprawled on the little thumb-shaped piece of soil had landed. Now quickly the huge sweeping rim of Jupiter plunged down, and night fell over the land.

Fierce darkness. Jungle and swamp awoke with their scale of savage life. Swift swooping shapes winged out from the trees, prey-hungry eyes gleaming green. And from the swamps came bellowings and stirrings from monster mud-encrusted bodies, awakening to their nocturnal quest for food. The night reechoed with the harsh cacophony of their cries.

With lumbering caution, its smooth knob head waving on a long reptilian neck, its heavy armored tail dragging behind its body's folds of flesh, a giant night-thing came stumping out of a copse of jungle growth—a buru. Its eyes were watchful, but centered mainly on the pool of water to one side of the peninsula of firm soil. Its drinking water was there. With several pauses, it went right out on the spit, and a flat-bottomed foot twice the size of an elephant's missed one of the sleeping forms by inches. But the buru cared not for them. It was not a flesh-eater. Its undulating neck stretched far out; its head dipped; water was lapped up—until it caught sight of the uprooted giant stump lying pitched in the pool. The beast drank but little after that, and retreated as cautiously as it had come.

Five or six of its fellows of the swamps followed at intervals to the water, grotesque hulking shapes, odorous and slimy with mud. All drank from the same spot; all ignored, save for a tentative rooting snuffle, the unconscious figures lying puny beneath them. But all noticed the twisted roots of the stump, sticking out in a score of directions, and avoided them.

And then there came smaller, more cautious animals who did not drink from the favored spot, who surveyed it, sniffed, hesitated, and finally retreated. There was a good reason for this caution.

For with the falling of night the stump had been at least thirty feet out in the water; now it was not ten feet from the side of the spit, and not twelve feet from the nearest sleeping figure. The suits that clad the three figures were sealed, the face-plates closed, so there was probably—after their trip through the void—no man smell to attract the giants of swamp and trees. But those three figures had moved. That was lure enough for one monster.

When the first ruddy arrows of Jupiter's light laced through the jungle's highest foliage, the twisted, gnarled stump was settled on the peninsula's rim, half out of the water. And when day burst, when Jupiter's flaming arch pushed over into view, the long seeming-roots eeled forward in sinuous, reptilian life.

IN one second Hawk Carse was snatched from sleep into the turmoil of a fight for life.

Something hard and enormously powerful was wrapping his waist with a vise-like grip that threatened to cut him in two. He felt a leg go up and crumple back, almost breaking under the force of a lashing blow. He was squeezed in, caged, compressed, by a score of tough, encircling tentacles, and his whole body was drawn toward a wide, flexible, black-lipped mouth yawning in the center of the monster he had thought a stump. Moving with loathsome life, its sinewy root-tentacles sucking him whole into the maw, the thing hunched itself back to the water.

The water frothed around Carse. He had been too dazed to resist; he had not known what had gripped him in his unconsciousness and weakness. But he remembered his ray-gun.

The lips of the hideous mouth were pressing close. Both were now under the surface. Carse's suit was still tight and he could breathe even while totally submerged in the water. He strained his left arm against the tentacle that looped it, worked the ray-gun still clasped in his hand in line with the thing's monstrous carcass, and at once, gasping and sick, pulled the trigger clear back.

The orange stream sizzled as it cleared a path through the water and bit true into the gaping mouth. There sounded a curious, subterranean sob; beady eyes on each side of the mouth bulged; the woodish body quivered in agony. Its tentacles slackened, and, half fainting, the Hawk wrenched free. He staggered up onto the land, streams of water running off the suit, and toppled over; and from there he saw the thing drag its writhing shuddering shape farther out from the shore. When perhaps sixty feet away it again subsided into a "harmless" uprooted old stump. . . .

CARSE lay resting and collecting himself for a quarter of an hour, while Leithgow and Friday slept on, unconscious of what had happened; then he got to his feet, opened their face-plates and bathed Leithgow's pale brow with water. The scientist awoke with the quickness of old men, but Friday stirred and stretched and blinked and sat up at last, yawning.

The Hawk answered their questions about his wet suit with a brief explanation of the fight, then got down to business.

"There's water here, but we must have food," he said. "Friday, you go back and find fruit; some isuan weed, too, if it's growing nearby. A chew of it will stimulate us. Keep your ray-gun ready. I wouldn't be here if I'd not had mine."

The isuan was a big help. In its prepared form it is degrading, mind-destroying, but in natural state it gives a powerful and comparatively harmless stimulation. Chewing on the leaves that the Negro brought back, they made strength and renewed vitality for their bodies, and came, for the first time since they had started their flight through space, to a near-normal state. Meaty, yellow globules of pear-like fruit, followed by prudent drafts of water, aided also. Friday's long-absent grin returned as he bit into the juicy fruit, and he announced through a mouthful:

"Well, things're lookin' sunny again! We've got food and water inside us; we can reach Master Leithgow's laboratory in these here suits; an' to top it all we've finished high an' mighty Ku Sui. He's dead at last! Boy, it sure feels good to know it!"

Eliot Leithgow was lying back, breathing deeply of the fresh morning air. His lined, worn face and body were relaxed. "Yes," he murmured, "it is good to know that Dr. Ku is now just a thing of the past. He and his coordinated brains." He glanced aside at the Hawk, sitting silent and still, and stroking, as always when in meditation, the bangs of flaxen hair which obscured his forehead. "Why so serious, Carse?" he asked.

THE adventurer's gray eyes were cold and sober. No relaxation showed in them. His hand paused in its slow smoothing movement and he spoke.

"Why I overlooked it before," he said quietly, almost as if to himself, "I don't know. Probably because I was too tired, and too busy, and too sick to think. But now I see."

"What?" Leithgow sat up straight.

"Eliot," said the Hawk clearly, "doesn't it seem strange to you that Ku Sui's asteroid continued to be invisible after we had smashed through its dome?"

"What do you mean?"

"We've assumed that our smashing the dome and opening it to space killed Ku Sui and everyone inside, and destroyed all the mechanisms, including the coordinated brains. But the mechanism controlling the asteroid's invisibility was not destroyed. The place remained invisible."

The old scientist's face grew tense. Carse paused for a moment.

"That means," he went on, "that Ku Sui provided the invisibility machine with special protection for just such an emergency. And do you think he would give *it* such protection and not his coordinated brains? Wouldn't he first protect the brains, his most cherished possession?"

Eliot Leithgow knew what this meant. The Hawk had promised the brains in that machine—brains of five renowned scientists, kept cruelly, unnaturally alive by Dr. Ku—that he would destroy them. And his promises were always kept.

There was no evading the logic of this reasoning. The Master Scientist nodded. "Yes," he answered. "He certainly would."

"I couldn't damage the case they were in," Carse continued. "The whole device seemed self-contained. It means just one thing: special protection. Since the mechanism for invisibility survived the crashing of the dome, we may be sure that the brain machine did too. And more than that: we may assume that there was special protection for the most precious thing of all to Dr. Ku Sui—his own life."

Friday's mouth gaped open. The old scientist cried out:

"My God! Ku Sui—still alive?"

"It would seem so," said Hawk Carse.

He amplified his evidence. "Look at these space-suits we're wearing. We got them and escaped by them, but they're Dr. Ku's. Couldn't he have protected himself with one too? He had plenty of time. And then the construction of the asteroid's buildings—all metal, with tight, sealed doors! Oh, stupid, stupid! Why didn't I see it all before? Here, in my weakness and sickness, I thought we'd killed Ku Sui and destroyed the coordinated brains!"

Leithgow looked suddenly very old and tired. The calamity did not end there. There were other angles, and an immediate one of high danger. In a lifeless voice he said:

"Carse, our whole situation's changed by this. We intended to go straight to my laboratory, but we may not be able to. The laboratory may already be closed to us. And even if not, there'd be a big risk in going there."

"Closed to us by what?" the Hawk demanded sharply. "A risk from what?"

Old Leithgow pressed his hands over his face. "Let me think a moment," he said.

THERE were very good reasons why Eliot Leithgow maintained his chief laboratory on the dangerous Satellite III. Other planets might have offered more friendly locations, but III possessed stores of accessible minerals valuable to the scientist's varied work, and its position in the solar system was most convenient, being roughly halfway between Earth and the outermost frontiers. Leithgow had counterbalanced the inherent peril of the laboratory's location by ingenious camouflage, intricate defenses and hidden underground entrances; had, indeed, hidden it so well that none of the scavengers and brigands and more personal enemies who infested Port o' Porno remotely suspected that his headquarters was on the satellite at all. Ships, men, could pass over it a score of times with never an inkling that it lay below.

After a short silence, Eliot Leithgow began his explanation.

"You'll remember," he told the intent Hawk, "that Ku Sui's men kidnaped me from our friend Kurgo's house in Porno. There were five of them; robot-coolies. They took us entirely by surprise, and killed Kurgo and bore me to Ku Sui's asteroid.

"Well, I had come to Kurgo's house in the first place to arrange for supplies for building an addition to my laboratory, and I had with me a sheaf of papers containing plans for this addition. The plans are not important; they tell nothing—but there was a figure on one of the papers that might reveal everything! The figure 5,576.34. Do you know what that stands for?"

The adventurer thought for a moment, then shook his head. Leithgow nodded. He went on:

"Few would. *But among the few would be Ku Sui!*

"You'll remember that on building my laboratory we considered it extremely important to have it on the other side of the globe from Port o' Porno—diametrically opposite—so that the movements of our ships to and from it would be hidden from that pirate port. Diametrically opposite—remember? Well, the diameter of Satellite III is 3,550 miles. This diameter multiplied by 3.1416 gives 11,152.68 miles as the circumference, and one half the circumference is 5,576.34 miles—the exact distance of my laboratory from Port o' Porno!"

"I see," Carse murmured. "I see."

"That figure meant nothing to you, nor would it to the average person; but to a mathematician and astronomer — to Dr. Ku Sui — it would be a challenge! He would be studying the paper on which it is writen down. One of Eliot Leithgow's papers. Plans for an addition to a laboratory. Therefore, Eliot Leithgow's laboratory. And then the figure: half the circumference of Satellite III. Why, he would at once deduce that it gave the precise location of my laboratory!"

THE Hawk rose quickly. "If those papers fell into Dr. Ku's hands—"

"He would know exactly where the laboratory is," Leithgow finished. "He would search. Its camouflage would not hold him long. And that would be the end of my laboratory—and us too, if we were caught inside."

"Yes," snapped the Hawk. "You imply that the papers were left in Kurgo's house?"

"I had them in the bottom drawer of the clothes-chest in the room I always use. The coolies did not take them. At that time they wanted nothing but me."

Friday, rubbing his woolly crown, interjected: "But, even if Ku Sui's still alive, he wouldn't know about them papers. Far's *I* can see, they're safe."

"No!" Leithgow cried. "That's it! They're not! Follow it logically, point by point. Assuming that Dr. Ku's alive, he has one point of contact with us—Kurgo's house, in Porno, where I was kidnaped. He wants us badly. He will anticipate that one of us will go back to that house: to care for Kurgo's body, to get my belongings—for several reasons. So he will radio down—he probably can't come himself—for henchmen to station themselves at the house and to ransack it thoroughly for anything pertaining to me. The papers would fall into their hands!"

"All right," said Carse levelly. "We must get those papers. They will either be still in the house or in the possession of Dr. Ku's men at Porno. But whichever it is—*we must get them before Ku Sui does.*" He paused.

"Well," he said, "that means me." He turned and looked down at the old man and smiled. "There's no use risking the three of us. I'll go to Kurgo's house myself."

"If the papers are gone, suh?" asked Friday.

"I don't know. What I do will depend on what I discover there."

"But," said Leithgow, "there may be guards! There may be an ambush!"

"I have a powerful weapon, M. S. Unknown, so far; new to Satellite III. Ku Sui himself supplied it. This space-suit."

THE Hawk scanned the "western" sky and began giving brisk orders.

"Eliot, you've got to go to some place of safety until this is all over. You too, Eclipse, to take care of him. Let me see. . . . There's Cairnes, and Wilson. . . . Wilson's the one. He should be at his ranch now. You remember it: Ban Wilson's ranch, on the Great Briney Lake? Right. Both of you will go there and wait. I'll meet you there when I'm finished. And at that time I'll either have the papers or know that Ku Sui has found the laboratory."

Again on his feet, the old Master Scientist regarded anxiously this slender, coldly calculating man who was his closest friend. He was afraid. "Carse," he said, "you're going back alone into probable danger. The papers—the laboratory—they're important—but not so important as your life."

There was visible now in the Hawk's face that hard, unflinching will-to-do that had made him the spectacular adventurer that he was. "Did you ever know me to run from danger?" he asked softly. "Did you ever know me to run from Ku Sui? . . ." And Eliot Leithgow knew that the course was set, no matter what it might hold.

Carse again glanced at Jupiter, hanging massive in the blue overhead. "About three hours of daylight left," he observed. "Now, close face-plates. We must go up—far up—to get our bearings."

Altitude swept back the horizon as they arrowed up through the warm, glowing air. From far in the heavens, perhaps twenty miles, Carse saw what he looked for—a bright gleam of silver in the monochrome of the terrain, where Jupiter's light struck on the smooth metal hides of a group of spaceships resting in the satellite's lone port, Porno. Eighty, a hundred

miles away—some such distance. Into the helmet's tiny microphone he said:

"That's Porno, over to the 'north,' and there to one side is the Great Briney. It's not far: you won't have to hurry, Eliot. Head straight for the lake and follow the near shoreline toward Porno, and you'll come to Ban Wilson's ranch. Now we part."

The three clinging, giant forms separated. The direction-rods for horizontal movement were outhinged. A last touch of mitten-gloves on the bloated suits' fabric; a nod and a smile through the faceplates; and a few parting words:

"Good luck, old comrade!"—in Leithgow's soft voice; and the Negro's deep, emphatic bass: "Don't know how far these little sets work, suh, but if you need me, call. I'll keep listenin'!"

And then white man and black were speeding away in the ruddy flood of Jupiter-light, and Hawk Carse faced the danger trail alone, as was his wont.

CAUTION rather than speed had to mark his journey, Carse knew. Several ranches lay scattered in the jungle smother between him and the port—stations where the weed isuan was collected and refined into the deadly finished product. They were worked for the most part by Venusians allied with Ku Sui; the Eurasian practically controlled the drug trade; and therefore, if any alarm had been broadcast, many men would already be on the lookout for him.

So the Hawk dropped low, and chose a course through the screening walls of the jungle. It did not take him long to attain full mastery of the suit's controls, and soon he was gliding cleanly through the hollows created by the mammoth outthrusting treetops in a course crazy and twisted, but one which kept him pointing always towards Porno. Presently he found an easier highway and a faster—a sluggish, dirty yellow stream, quite broad, which ended, he was sure, in a swamp within a mile of his destination.

Flanked by the jungle growth which sprouted thickly from each bank, a gray, ghostly shape in the shadows lying over the water, he sped through the dying afternoon. He kept at least ten feet above the surface, well out of reach of such water beasts as from time to time reared up through the placid surface to scan him. Once a huge gantor, gulping a drink from the bank, snorted and went trumpeting away at the grotesque sight of him—flying without wings!—and once too, on rising cautiously above the treetops to reconnoiter, Carse saw life far more perilous to him: a small party of men, stooping over a swamp-brink and plucking the ripe isuan weed. At this he dived steeply and fled on; and he knew he had gone unobserved, for there came no outcry of discovery from behind.

JUPITER lowered its murky disk as the miles streamed past, breeding a legion of shadows welcome to the fabric-clad monster skimming through them and to the creatures who blinked and stirred as night approached. The stream broadened into shallow pockets; patches of swamp appeared and absorbed the stream; and Carse knew he was close to his destination.

He cut his speed and glanced around. Ahead, the dark spire of a giant sakari tree climbed into the gloom. It would be a good place. The man rose slowly; like a wraith on the wind he lifted into its topmost branches: and there, in the broad, cuplike leaves, he warily ensconced himself. For man-sounds

came into his opened helmet, and through a fringe of leaves, across a mile of tumbled swamp and marsh, he could see the guarding fences of the cosmetropolis of Porno.

A last slice of blotched, flaming red, the rim of setting Jupiter, still silhouetted Porno, sprawled inside its high, electric-wired fences, and the flood of fading light brushed the town with beauty. The rows of tin shacks which housed its dives, the clustered, nondescript hovels, the merchants' grim strongholds of steel—all merged into a glowing mirage, a scene far alien to the brooding swamp and savage jungle in whose breast it lay. Here and there several space-ships reared their sunset-gilded flanks, glittering high-lights in the final glorious burst of Jupiter-light. . . .

The planet's rim vanished abruptly, and Porno returned to true character.

For a moment it appeared what it was: a blotched, disordered huddle, ugly, raw, fit companion of the swamp and jungle. Then beads of light appeared, some still, some winking, one crooked line of flaring illumination marking the Street of the Sailors, along which the notorious kantrans flourished, now ready for their nightly brood of men who sought forgetfulness in revelry. Soon, Carse knew, the faint man-noises he heard would grow into a broad fabric of sound, stitched across by shrieks and roars as the isuan and alkite flowed free. And all around the lone watcher in the sakari tree the night-monsters were crawling out in jungle and swamp on the dark routine of their lives as, in the town, two-legged creatures even lower in their degradation went abroad after the dope and liquor which gave them their vicious recreation.

The night flowed thicker around him.

FROM somewhere behind, the Hawk heard a suck of half-fluid mud as a giant body stretched in its sleeping place. A tree close to his suddenly fluttered with the unseen life it harbored. A hungry gantor raised its long deep bellow to the night, and another answered, and another.

It grew pitch black. Only a sprinkling of pin-points of light marked Porno to the eye. The sky beyond the town matched the sky to the rear. Jupiter's light now had fled the higher air levels. The time had come.

Cautiously Carse brushed the branches aside, rose upright and pressed the mitten switch over to repulsion. In instant response his giant's bulk lifted lightly. He sped upward, straight and fast; and at two thousand feet, still untouched by the sinking planet's rays, he brought himself to an approximate halt and peered below.

Port o' Porno lay spread out beneath, one thin line of light-pricks off which angled fainter lines, extending only a short distance and then dying widely off. There were perhaps two thousand men in the town—men from all the countries of the three planets inhabited by creatures that could be called human—and of these at least three quarters knew Hawk Carse as an enemy, because of his intolerance for their dope-trade. His approach to the house Number 574 had to be swift, direct, unseen, unheard.

He was able to make it so. Pointing the direction rod, he winged forward until directly above an estimated spot, then dropped a thousand feet. A pause while he searched; another drop. He knew Kurgo's house well, but the scene was confusing from above, and the street the house was on was always dark at night.

He made it out at last. The squat two-storied structure, similar to

other merchants' strongholds, seemed unlit and unwatched. Carse swung back the hinged mittens of the suit and slid his hands out ready for action. In his left he took his ray-gun; then, pressing the mitten-switch, he dropped straight, silent, swift, like the Hawk he now truly was.

A SINGLE window-port, high up, broke the smooth rear of Kurgo's house. It faced a silent alleyway. The steel shutters were closed, but a pull swung them noiselessly outward. For a brief moment Carse's bulging giant's figure of metal and fabric hung black against the shadowed window-port. The room he peered into was solid black. He heard no sound. Clumsily he thrust out and stepped in.

Silence. Inky nothingness—but the air was weighted with many things, and among them one which brought the short hairs on the Hawk's neck prickling erect. A smell! It was not to be mistaken—a faint, but rank and fetid and altogether identifying smell—the body-smell of a Venusian!

For a moment Hawk Carse's breathing stopped. Metal clanked on metal for an instant as he moved from the window-port and became one with the darkness inside; then silence again, as his eyes trained into the vault and his hand held ready on the ray-gun. He waited.

Was it a trap? He had seen no guards watching the house; had sensed it deserted. But the steep shutters, unlocked, readily permitting entrance—and the smell! Even if not still there, a Venusian had been in the room, and a Venusian of Port o' Porno was an enemy. A Venusian. . . . There were only some sixty on the whole satellite, and, of these, fifty were the men of Lar Tantril. Lar Tantril, powerful henchman of Dr. Ku Sui, director of the Eurasian's drug trade on Satellite III. But that line of thought had to wait.

"I see you!" he whispered suddenly and sharply. "My gun's on you. Come forward!"

NO answer; not the slightest sign or stir in the darkness. He breathed again.

Carse knew the arrangement of Kurgo's house. He was in his second-story sleeping-room. There was a door in the wall ahead, leading into the room Leithgow was accustomed to use on his visits, and there the papers should be. But first he would have to have light.

His ears pitched for any betraying sound, Carse moved heavily to his left until a wall arrested him. He felt along it, located the desk he sought for and scoured through it. His fingers found the flash he knew was there.

The darkness then was slit by a hard straight line of white. It shot over the room picking out overturned chairs, a bowl that had toppled to the floor, scattering its contents of ripe akalot fruit, a sleeping couch, its sheets and pillows awry, and—something human.

A half-clothed body lay sprawled beside the couch, its hands thrust clutching forward and its unseeing eyes still staring at the door whence had come the shots that had burnt out the left side of its chest. Dead. Three days dead. The murdered master of the house, Kurgo, lying where Ku Sui's robot-coolies had shot him down.

The Venusian-smell swept more strongly into his nostrils as the adventurer opened the door into Leithgow's room. No Venusian had ever been in those room *before* the abduction.

Carse's light danced over the room's confusion: a laboratory table overturned; apparatus spilled;

several chairs flung around, one splintered: mute signs of the struggle Eliot Leithgow had offered his kidnapers.

In a corner stood a metal chest. In the bottom drawer was the all-significant answer. Hawk Carse crossed the room and slid it open.

The papers were gone!

METHODICALLY Carse hunted through every drawer and corner of the room, but he found no trace of them. Every article that would be of value to an ordinary thief was left; the one thing important to Dr. Ku Sui, the sheaf of papers, was missing.

The presence of the Venusian body-smell started an important train of thought in the Hawk's mind. It signified that the papers had been taken by henchmen of Ku Sui, which in turn signified that Ku Sui had survived the crashing of the dome and was alive and again aggressively dangerous. But was the Eurasian already on Satellite III? Was he already in personal possession of the papers?—perhaps conducting a search for Leithgow's laboratory?

Or did it mean that Dr. Ku had merely radioed instructions for his Venusian henchmen to ransack the house, take whatever pertained to Leithgow, and wait for him?

Venusians. . . . There was only one logical man; and as Hawk Carse thought of him in that dark and silent house of tragedy, his right hand slowly rose to the bangs of hair over his forehead and began to stroke them. . . .

His bangs were an unusual style for the period; they stamped him and attracted unwanted attention; but he would wear his hair in that fashion until he went down in death. For he had once been trapped—trapped neatly by five men, and maltreated: one, Judd the Kite, whose life had paid already for his part in the ugly business; two others whom he was not now concerned with; the fourth, Dr. Ku Sui; and the fifth—a Venusian. . . .

That fifth, the Venusian, was Lar Tantril, now one of Ku Sui's most powerful henchmen, and director of his interplanetary drug traffic—Lar Tantril, who possessed an impregnable isuan ranch only twenty-five miles from Port o' Porno—*Lar Tantril, who probably had directed the stealing of the papers from this room! The papers, if not already in Ku Sui's hands, should be at Tantril's ranch.*

Carse's deduction was followed by a swift decision. He had to raid Lar Tantril's ranch.

He knew the place fairly well. Once, even, he had attacked it, in his *Star Devil,* seeking to wipe out his debt against Tantril; but he had been driven off by the ranch's mighty offensive rays.

It was impregnable, Tantril was fond of boasting. Situated on the brink of the Great Briney, its other three sides were flanked by thick, swampy jungle, in which the isuan grew and was gathered by Tantril's Venusian workers. Ranch? More a fort than a ranch, with its electrified, steel-spiked fence; its three watch-towers, lookouts always posted there again the threat of hijackers or enemies; its powerful ray-batteries and miscellany of smaller weapons. A less vulnerable place for the keeping of Eliot Leithgow's papers could hardly have been found in all the frontiers of the solar system.

He, Carse, had raided it in a modern fighting space-ship, and failed. Now, with nothing but a space-suit and a ray-gun, he had to raid it again—and succeed!

THE adventurer did not leave immediately. He thought it wise to make what preparations he could. His important weapon was

the space-suit; therefore, he took it off and studied and inspected its several intricate mechanisms as well as he could in the carefully guarded light of his flash.

It was motivated, he saw, by dual sets of gravity-plates, in separate space-tight compartments. One set was located in the extremely thick soles of the heavy boots; the other rested on the top of the helmet. He saw why this was. The gravity-plates for repulsion were those in the helmet; for attraction, those in the boot-soles. This kept the wearer of the suit always in an upright, head-up position.

The logical plan of attack had grown in Carse's mind: down and up! Down to the papers, then up and away before the men on the ranch knew what was happening; he could suppose that they, like all others on the satellite, had no knowledge of a self-propulsive space-suit. The success of his raid depended entirely on keeping the two gravity mechanisms intact. If they were destroyed, or failed to function, he would be locked to the ground in a prison of metal and fabric; clamped down, literally, by a terrific dead weight! The suit was extremely heavy, particularly the boots, and Carse learned that the wearer was able to walk in it only because a portion of the helmet's repulsive force was continually working to approximate a normal body gravity.

A chance to succeed—if the two vital points were kept intact! If they failed, he would have to slip out of the imprisoning suit and use his quick wits and deadly ray-gun in clearing a path to Ban Wilson, his nearest friend, whose ranch, fourteen miles from Tantril's stronghold, was where Eliot Leithgow and Friday would be awaiting him.

It was characteristic of Hawk Carse that he never even considered calling on Wilson's resources of men and weapons to help him. A Hawk he was: wiry, fierce-clawed, bold against odds and danger, most capable and deadly when striking alone. . . .

AFTER scanning the whole project, Carse attended to other needs. He ate some of the akalot fruit spilled over the floor of the adjoining room; opened a can of water and drank deeply; limbered his muscles well; even rested for five minutes. Then he was ready to leave.

He soon was again in the cold space-suit, fastening on the helmet. He left the face-plate open. The left mitten he hinged back, so as to be able to grip the ray-gun in his bare hand. Then, a looming giant shadow in the darkness, he shuffled to the rear window-port.

Carse steadied himself on the sill. The night-bedlam from the Street of the Sailors, punctuated by far, hungry bellows from swamp monsters, sounded in his ears. Enemies, human and animal, ringed him in Kurgo's house; but up above lay a clean, cold highway, an open highway, stretching straight to the heart of the danger which was his destination. He turned the mitten-switch over to quick repulsion and leaped up to the waiting heavens.

ON the ground was a world of night; a mile up showed a great circle of black, one edge of which was marked by a faint, eery glow from further-setting Jupiter.

Save for that far-off spectral hint of the giant occulted planet, Hawk Carse sped in darkness. Through the open face-plate the night wind buffeted his emotionless, stone-set face; his suit whistled a song of speed as the gusts laced by it. Down and ahead his direction rod pointed, and with ever-gathering momentum he followed its leading

finger. The lights of Porno dwindled to points, grew yet finer, then were gone. Several times a sparse cluster of other lights, lonely in the black tide of III's surface, ran beneath him, signaling a ranch. The last of these melted into the ink behind, and there was a period unrelieved by sign of man's presence below.

And then at last one bright solitary spot of light appeared, far ahead. It was a danger signal to the Hawk. He had to descend at once. From then on, speed had to be forsaken for caution. Watchful eyes were beneath that light, lying keen on the heavens; a whole intricate offense and defense system surrounded it. It was the central watch-beacon of Lar Tantril's ranch.

Carse swooped low.

He came into the night-world of the surface. No faint-lit horizon showed; there was only the darkness, and darker shadows peopling it. At the height of a mile there had been no signs of the satellite's native life, but at an elevation scarcely above the treetops the flying man was brought all too close to the reality of the denizens of the gloomy jungle below. Out of the black smother came clues to the life within it: sounds of monstrous bodies moving through the undergrowth and mud, recurring death-screams, howls and angry chatterings. . . .

THIS below; there was more above. He was not the only living thing that soared in the night. Swift fleeting batlike shapes would appear from nowhere for one sharp second, would beset him one after another in an almost constant stream, thinking his comparatively clumsy, bloated bulk easy prey, and then be gone. He snapped shut his face-plate under their assault. Sometimes there came different, more powerful wings, and he would duck in mechanical reaction, sensing the wings sweep past, often feeling them as, with sharp pecks and quick thudding blows, they sought to stun him. But the suit was stout; the repulsed attackers could only follow a little, glaring at him with fire-green malevolent eyes, then leave to seek smaller prey.

The watch-beacon began to wink more often through the ranks of intervening trees as he neared the ranch. Carse was gliding so low that often branches raked and twisted him in his course. His low transit allowed one tree to loose great peril upon him.

The tree loomed a black giant in his path. Fifty feet away, he was swerving to wind around it when he noticed its dark upper branches a-tremble. He had only this for warning when, with chilling surprise, what appeared to be the entire top of the tree rose, severed itself completely from the rest and soared right out to meet him.

A shape from a nightmare, it slid over the adventurer. He saw two green-glowing saucer-sized eyes; heard the wings rattling bonily as they spread to full thirty feet; heard the monster's life-thirsty scream as it plunged. The stars were blotted out. It was upon him.

BUT even in the sudden confusion of the attack, Carse knew the creature for what it was: a full-grown specimen of the giant carnivorous lemak, a seldom-seen, dying species, too clumsy, too slow, too huge to survive. His ray-gun came around, but he was caught in a feathered maelstrom and knocked too violently around to use it. Without pause the lemak's claws raked his suit. Unable to rend the tough fabric, it resorted to another method. With a strength so enor-

mous that it could overcome the force of the gravity-plates and his forward momentum, the creature tossed him free. Dizzy, he hurtled upward. But he knew that the bird's purpose was to impale him on the long steely spike of its beak as he came twisting down.

The lemak poised below, snout and spear-like beak raised. But it waited in vain, for Carse did not come dropping down. A touch of the control switch and he stayed at the new level, collecting himself. The lemak, puzzled and angry, wheeled up to see what had become of the victim that did not descend, and found instead a searing needle of heat which burnt through its broad right wing. Then, screaming with pain and in a frenzy to escape, it went with a rush into the far darkness.

The Hawk dropped low again, hoping that his gun's quick flash had not been observed. He had not wished to wound the lemak mortally, for no matter how accurate his shot the monster would take long to die, and scream and thrash as it did so. One short spit of orange was preferable to a prolonged hullabaloo. But even that might have betrayed him. . . .

With elaborate caution, he reconnoitered Lar Tantril's ranch.

FROM above, the ranch clearing was a pool of faint light contained in black leagues of jungle and the edge of the Great Briney. Slanting shadows and the dark bulks of buildings that were unlit rendered the details vague, but under prolonged scrutiny the appointments of the ranch became visible.

The clearing was a circle some two hundred yards in diameter. Just inside the jungle wall was the first line of protection, a steel-barbed, twenty-foot-high fence, its strong corded links interwoven with electrified wires. Well within this fence stood five buildings, low, squat and one-storied, four of them forming a broken square around the central fifth. Two buildings were pierced by low rows of lighted windows, evidence that they were the barracks of the workers; two others, devoted to the processing of the isuan weed, were now dark and silent. The central building was smaller, with window-ports that were glowing eyes in the smooth metal walls. It was the dwelling of the master, Lar Tantril.

Close to the central building rose a hundred-foot tower, topped by the watch-beacon. At three equi-distant points around the encompassing fence, small, square platforms were held sixty feet aloft by mast-like triangular towers, up which foot-rungs led. And on each platform could be made out the figure of a Venusian guard.

Ceaselessly these guards turned and scanned the jungle, the heavens, the unbroken dark prairie of the lake, alert for anything of suspicion. Lar Tantril had good reasons for maintaining a constant watch over his stronghold, and his guards' eyes were sharpened by knowledge of the severe payment laxness would bring. Close at hand in the platforms were knobs which, pressed, would ring a clanging alarm through all the buildings below; and each guard wore two ray-gun holsters.

Despite the guards and the ugly spikes of the fence, however, the ranch from above appeared peaceful, calm and harmless. No men were visible on its shadow-dappled clearing. Even the surrounding jungle, in the watch-beacon's shaded underside, might have been nothing but a stage set, were it not for the occasional signs of the life that crept unseen through it—a long, far-distant howl, a quickly receding crashing in the under-

growth, a thumping from some small animal.

The guards were used to this pattern of nocturnal sounds. It was only when, from a tree not thirty feet from one of the platforms, there came a sudden sharp shaking in the upper branches, that the Venusian on that platform deigned to grip his ray-gun and peer suspiciously. All he saw was a large bird that flapped out and winged across the clearing, mewing angrily.

The guard released his grip on the gun. A snake, probably, had disturbed the bird. Or some of those devilish little crimson bansis, half insect, half crab. . . .

HAWK CARSE breathed again. He had been sure his position would be revealed when, drifting with almost imperceptible motion into the tree, the bird had pecked at him, then flapped away in alarm. A long, painfully cautious approach from tree to tree to the selected one had been necessary to the daring scheme of attack he had evolved.

He seemed to be safe. Through a fringe of leaves he saw the guard on the platform glancing elsewhere. Carse steadied himself, rose slightly and again scanned the ranch.

Yes, it looked harmless, but he knew that nothing could be further from the reality. Spaced around the inside edge of that spiky fence were small metal nozzles protruding a few inches from the ground; and on the turning of a control wheel, they would hurl forth a deadly orange swathe, fanning hundreds of feet into the sky. He had tasted their hot breath once when attacking the ranch in his *Star Devil*. Then there were the long-range projectors whose muzzles studded the central building. And the ray-guns of the tower guards.

These were dangers that he knew, for he had experienced them. What others the ranch held, he could not well surmise. But he saw one significant thing that gave him pause and brought lines to his brow.

The ranch was expecting trouble. Over to one side of the clearing rested a great rounded object, on whose smooth hull gleamed coldly the light from the beacon—Lar Tantril's own personal space-ship—and alongside it a smaller, somewhat similar shape, the ranch's air-car! The space-ship signified that the Venusian chief was present; the air-car, that all his men were gathered in the barracks, and not, as was their custom, in Port o' Porno for a night of revelry!

All waiting—all gathered here—all ready! All grouped for a strong defense! Did it mean what it would appear to—that he, the Hawk, was expected?

He could not know. He could not know if a trap was lying prepared there against his coming. He could but go ahead, and find out.

The only plan of attack he could think of had grown in his mind. Down and up: that was the essence of it: but the details were difficult. He had worked them out as far as he could with typical thoroughness. He had to reach the heart of the fort lying before him: had to reach the central house, Lar Tantril's own. The precious papers would be there, if anywhere.

The Hawk was ready.

He gathered his muscles. His face was cold and hard, his eyes mists of gray. There was no least sign in the man that, in the next few all-deciding minutes, death would lick close to him.

He poised where he was precariously balanced. His ray-gun was in his bare left hand; his face-plate was locked partly open. He raised his fingers to the direction rod on the suit's breast, gazed straight at the guard on the nearest watch-platform and snapped the direction rod out, pointing it at that guard.

WHAT happened then struck so fast, so unexpectedly, that it took only thirty seconds to plunge the quiet ranch into chaos.

The Hawk came like a thunderbolt, using to its full power his only weapon, the space-suit. The sight of him might alone have been enough to strike terror. From the dark arms of the tree he hurtled, his bloated monstrous shape of metal and fabric dull in the glow of the watch-beacon, and crashed with a clang of metal into the platform he aimed at. Nothing there could withstand him. One second the guard on it was calmly gazing off into the sky; the next, like a nine-pin he was bowled over, to topple heels and head whirling to the ground sixty feet beneath. He lived, he kept consciousness, but he was sorely injured; and he never saw the outlandish projectile that struck him, nor saw it streak to the second watch-platform, bowling its guard out and to the ground likewise, and then repeating at the third and last!

A crash; a pause; a crash; a pause; then a third crash, and the thing of metal had completed the circuit, and all three watch-platforms were scooted empty!

Then came confusion.

There had been screams, but now a crazed voice began crying out mechanically, over and over:

"Space-suit! Space-suit! Space-suit! Space-suit!"

It came from the second guard, who lay twisting on the ground. His tongue, by some trick of nervous disorganization, beat out those words like a voice-disk whose needle keeps skipping its groove—and the effect was macabre.

THE central buildings disgorged a crowd of men. Shorty, wiry, thin-faced Venusians, each with skewer-blade strapped to his side and some with ray-guns out, they came scrambling into the open, swearing and wondering. The second guard's insane repetitions directed most of them in his direction; and they piled in a crowd around him. They had no attention for what was happening behind, within the buildings they had emptied. That was what Hawk Carse had planned.

A voice of authority roared up over the general hubbub.

"Rantol! Guard! Rantol, you fool! What happened? What attacked you? Cut that crazy yelling! Answer me!—you, Rantol!"

"Space-suit! Space-suit! Space-suit! Space—"

"Lar Tantril!" A man with suspicious eyes caught the attention of the one who had spoken first. "Space-suit, he says! A flying space-suit! Only Ku Sui has space-suits that fly; or only Ku Sui *had* them, rather. You know what that must mean!"

He paused, peering at his lord. The coarse yellowy skin of Tantril's brow wrinkled with the thought, then his tusk-like Venusian teeth showed as his lips drew apart in speech.

"Yes!" Lar Tantril said. "It's *Carse!*"

And he ordered the now silent men around him:

"Circle my house, all of you, your guns ready. You, Esret"—to his second in command—"out gun and come with me."

EVEN as Lar Tantril spoke, a giant shape was passing clumsily through the kitchen of his house. Carse had entered from the rear, unseen. With gun in hand and eyes sharp he crossed the deserted kitchen with its foul odors of Venusian cookery. Quickly, his metal-shod feet creating an unavoidable racket, he was through a connecting door and into the well-

furnished dining room. All was brightly lit; he could easily have been seen through the window-ports rimming each wall; but he counted on the confusion outside to keep the Venusians engaged for several minutes more.

Then he went shuffling into the front room of the house, and saw at once the most likely place.

It was in one corner—a large flat desk, and by it the broad panel of a radio. Scattered over the desk were a number of papers. In seconds Carse was bending over them, scanning and discarding with eyes and hands.

Reports of various quantities of isuan . . . orders for stores . . . a list that seemed an inventory of weapons—and then the top page of a sheaf covered with familiar, neat, small writing. Yes!

Plans and calculations dealing with a laboratory! And, down in the margin of the first page, the revealing, all-important figure—5,576.34!

He had them—and before Ku Sui! Now, only to get away, out the front door and up—up from this trap he was in—up into clean and empty space, and then to Leithgow and Friday at Ban Wilson's!

But, as the Hawk turned to go, his eye took in a little slip on the desk, a radio memo, with the name of Ku Sui at its top. Almost without volition he glanced over it, hoping to discover useful information about Ku Sui's asteroid—and with the passing of those few extra seconds his chance for escaping out the door passed too.

Carse's back was partly toward the front door when a voice, hard and deadly, spoke from it:

"Your hands up!"

THE adventurer's nerves twanged; he wheeled; and even as he did so another voice bit out from the rear door:

"Yes, up! One move and you're dead!"

And Hawk Carse found himself caught between ray-guns held unswervingly on his body by a man at each door. He was not fool enough to try to shoot, even though his own gun was in his hand: his best speed would be slow-motion in the hampering space-suit. He was fairly caught—because for a few precious seconds he had let his mind slip from the all-important matter of escaping.

At a shout from someone, both doors filled with men, and thin faces appeared at the window-ports. Their ray-guns made an impregnable fence around the netted Hawk.

And then a well-remembered voice, harsh as the man from whom it came, cut through the room.

"Apparently you're caught, Captain Carse!"

The cold gray eyes narrowed, scanned the room, the blocked doors, the barricade of guns held by the grim men at doorways and window-ports.

"Yes," Hawk Carse murmured. "Apparently I am."

LAR TANTRIL, the Venusian chief, smiled. He was tall for one of his race, even taller than the prisoner he faced. Clad in tight-fitting, iron-gray mesh, he had the characteristic wiry body, thin legs and arms of his kind. Spiky short-cropped hair grew like steel slivers from the narrow dome of his long hatchet head, and the taut-stretched skin of his face was burned a deep hard brown. He looked what he was: a bold and unscrupulous leader of his men.

"The gun in your belt," he said, "—drop it. Right on the floor. There—better. I like you not with a gun near your hand, Carse."

The Hawk regarded him frigidly.

"And now what?" he asked.

Lar Tantril continued smiling. His ray-gun did not move for an instant from the line it held on the metal and fabric giant. He said at a tangent, quite pleasantly:

"Think fast, Captain Carse—think fast! Isn't that one of Dr. Ku's new suits?—a little space-ship all your own? Why not plan a sudden sweep for that door in an attempt to crash through my men and get free up in the air—eh?"

"Why not?" said the Hawk.

"It might be possible," Tantril continued, "with your luck. *Unless something went wrong with your helmet gravity-plates.*"

At this the Venusian's gun moved. Deliberately it came up and aimed at the crown of the adventurer's helmet. Tantril squeezed the trigger.

Spang!

A pencil-thin streak of orange stabbed between Venusian and Earthling; sparks hissed out where it struck the tip of the helmet; and for an instant life and strength seemed to leave the grotesquely clad figure. Carse slumped down under a quick crushing weight. Weight! It bent him low, and it was only with a great effort that he was able to straighten again. For the suit's full load of metal and fabric was upon him now, its enormous boots binding him to the ground since their weight was unrelieved by the partial lift of the helmet plates. An inch-wide, black-rimmed hole in the mechanism above the helmet told what had happened.

Lar Tantril chortled, and his men, most of them only half comprehending what he had done, echoed him.

"But even yet you've got a chance," the Venusian went on. "There's another set of plates in the boot-soles, for attraction. If you got a chance to stand on your head outside, you'd be gone! So—"

THIS time he lowered the gun, and carefully, accurately, he sent two spitting streams of orange through the soles of the great boots.

The danger Carse had feared had come to pass. His one weapon had been destroyed. He was worse than helpless: he was in a cumbersome prison, all power of quick movement gone. He was a paralyzed giant, tied to the soil, the ways of the air hopelessly closed. The slightest step would cost great effort.

"You have protected yourself well, Lar Tantril," he said slowly.

Now Tantril laughed deeply and unrestrainedly. "Yes, and by Mother Venus," he cried, "it's good to see you this way, Carse, unarmed and in my power!" He turned to his circle of men and said: "Poor Hawk! Can't fly any more! I've put him in a cage! So thoughtful of him to bring his cage along with him so I could trap him inside it! His own cage!" He guffawed, shaking, and the others laughed loud.

Through it all Hawk Carse stood motionless, his face cold and graven, his slender body bent under the burden of the dead suit. He still held in his right hand, limp by his side, the sheaf of papers and their all-important figure—and the thumb and forefinger of his hand were moving, so slowly as to be hardly noticeable, in what seemed to be a lone sign of nervous tension.

"You know, Carse," Tantril observed after his laugh, "I've been half expecting you, though I don't see how you knew I was the one who took those papers you're holding. Dr. Ku radioed me, you see. I think you were reading his message at the time I entered. Did you finish it?"

"No," said the Hawk.

"You'll find it interesting. Let

me read it to you." And Tantril took up the memo.

"'From Ku Sui to Lar Tantril: Search House No. 574 in Port o' Porno closely for anything pertinent to Master Scientist Eliot Leithgow or giving clue to his whereabouts. Keep what you obtain for me; I will come to your ranch in five days. Watch for Hawk Carse, Eliot Leithgow and a Negro, arriving from space at Satellite III in self-propulsive space-suits.'" There followed some details concerning the suits' mechanism; then: "'Carse caused me certain trouble and came near hurting my major inventions. I want him badly.'"

AT this the adventurer's face tightened; his gray eyes went frosty. All he and Leithgow had deduced, then, was true. Dr. Ku had survived the crashing of the asteroid's dome. The mechanisms had also survived—and certainly the coordinated brains—the brains he, Hawk Carse, had promised to destroy! Now trapped, it seemed that promise could never be fulfilled. . . .

Yet even through this torturing thought of a promise unkept, the Hawk's thumb and forefinger moved in their slight grinding motion on the first sheet of the sheaf of papers. . . .

Lar Tantril reached out his hand for the sheaf. "So, obeying Dr. Ku's orders, I had the house searched and got these papers. They must be valuable, Carse, since you wanted them so badly. Ku Sui will be pleased. Hand them over."

With but the barest flick of gray eyes downward, Hawk Carse gave the sheaf to Tantril.

But his brief glance at the topmost sheet told him all he wanted to know. Gradually, methodically, the motion of thumb and forefinger had totally effaced the revealing figure 5,576.34, the one clue to the location of Leithgow's laboratory. Enough! What he had set out to do was finished. The chief task was achieved!

"And now, perhaps," Lar Tantril chuckled, "a little entertainment."

His men pricked up their ears. This language was more understandable. Entertainment meant playing with the prisoner—torture. And alkite, probably, and isuan. A night of revelry!

But Hawk Carse smiled thinly at this.

"Entertainment, Tantril?" his cold voice said. He paused, and then added slowly: "What a fool you are!"

LAR TANTRIL was not annoyed by the words. He only laughed and slapped his thigh.

"Yes?" he mocked. "Truly, Captain Carse, you must be frightened, to try and anger me so I'll shoot! Do you fear a skewer-blade so much? We would leave most of you for Ku Sui!"

Carse shook his head. "No, Lar Tantril, I don't want you to shoot me. I'm telling you you're a fool—because you think me one."

With a wave of his hands the Venusian protested: "No, no, not at all. You're infernally clever, Carse. I'll always be the first to admit it."

"Then do you think I'd attack your ranch alone?"

"You'd like me to believe you have friends hidden somewhere?" Tantril asked, smiling tolerantly.

Carse's voice came back curtly. "Believe what you like, but learn this: It's your boast that your ranch is impregnable, guarded on every side and from every angle. I'm telling you it's not. It's vulnerable. It's wide open to one way of attack—and my friends and I know it well."

For a second the Venusian's assurance wavered.

"Vulnerable?" he said. "Open to attack? You're just stalling!"

Whip-like words cut through.

"Wait and see. Wait till the ranch is stormed and wiped out. Wait twenty minutes! Only twenty!"

Hawk Carse was always listened to when he spoke in such manner. Lar Tantril stared at the hard gray eyes boring into his.

"Why do you tell me this?" he asked. Then, with a smile: "Why not wait until my ranch is wiped out, as you say?" His smile broadened. "Until these hidden friends attack?"

"Simply because I must insure my living. Nothing my friends could do would prevent your having plenty of time to kill me before you yourselves were destroyed. I think, under the circumstances, you *would* kill me. And I must go free. I have made a promise. A very important promise. I must be free to carry it out."

"Just what are you aiming at?"

"I'm offering," said the Hawk, "to show you where your fort is vulnerable—in time for you to protect it. I'll do this if you'll let me go free. *You need not release me till afterwards.*"

LAR TANTRIL'S mouth fell half open at this surprising turn. He was unquestionably taken aback. But he snapped his lips shut and considered the offer. A trick? Carse was famed for them. A trap? But how? He scanned his men. Fifty to one; fifty ray-guns on an unarmed man helpless in a hampering prison of metal and fabric. If a trap, Carse could not possibly escape death. But yet. . . .

Tantril walked over to his man Esret, and, stepping apart, they conferred in whispers.

"Is he trying to trick us?" the chief asked.

"I don't see how he can hope to. He can hardly move in that suit. It ties him down. We could keep tight guard upon him. He couldn't possibly get away. And at the slightest sign of something shady—"

"Yes; but you know him."

"What he says is sensible. Naturally he wants to live. He knows we'll shoot him if he tries to trick us, and he knows we'll do it if we're attacked! We'll of course leave men at all defensive stations. If there *is* a weakness here, if the ranch *is* vulnerable—we should learn what it is. It'll cost us nothing. We can't lose, and we might be saving everything. Of course we won't let him go afterwards."

Tantril considered a moment longer, then said:

"Yes. I think you are right."

He turned back to the waiting Carse.

"Agreed," he said. "Show this vulnerable point to us and you'll be released. But no false moves! One sign of treachery and you're dead!"

The Hawk's strong-cut face showed no change. It was only inwardly that he smiled.

THEIR very manner of accompanying him showed their respect for the slender adventurer.

He had no gun; he was stooped by the unrelieved weight of the massive helmet, the suit itself and the chunky blocks of metal which were the boots; his every dragging step was that of a man shackled by chains—but he was Hawk Carse! And so, as he shuffled out through the front door of the house and lumbered with painful effort across the clearing, he was surrounded by a glitter of ray-guns held by the close-pressing circle of men. Tantril's own gun kept steady on his broad fabric-clad back, and of its proximity he kept reminding Carse.

New guards were already on

watch on each of the three watch-platforms, their eyes sweeping around the clearing and the jungle and the dark stretch of the lake, and often returning to the crowd which marked the stumbling giant's progress below. Each point of defense was manned. In the ranch's central control room, a steel-sheathed cubby in the basement of Tantril's house, men stood watchful, their hands ready at the wheels and levers which commanded the ranch's ray-batteries, their eyes on the vision-screen which gave to this unseen heart of the place a panoramic view of what was transpiring above. And all waited on what the grotesque, bloated figure they watched might reveal.

Watch—watch—watch. A hundred eyes, below, above, beside the Hawk, were centered and alert on each move of his clumsy progress. The barrels of two-score ray-guns transfixed him. Under such guard he arrived at the ranch's fence where it approached the Great Briney.

"Open the gate," said the Hawk curtly. "It's down there."

He pointed to where the lake's pebbled beach shelved downward to the tiny murmurous waves, a ten-foot stretch of ghostly white between the guarding fence and the water.

"Down there?" repeated Tantril slowly. "Down to the lake?"

"Yes!" Carse snapped irritably. "Well, will you open the gate? I'm very tired: I can't bear this suit much longer."

LAR TANTRIL conferred uneasily with Esret, while his men cast shivering glances out over the dark wind-rippled plain of the lake. But no enemy showed there. The beach was clear for fifty yards on each side.

"By Iapetus!" the adventurer complained harshly, "are you children, to be afraid of the dark? Tantril, put your gun into me, and shoot if I try anything suspicious! Open the gate!"

Finally the lock was unfastened and the gate swung out. Tantril stationed a man there, ready to close and lock it in case of need, and then, Hawk Carse, still surrounded by the alert Venusians, shuffled down to the edge of the water.

Over the Great Briney was silence. No shape broke its calm. The air held only the nervous whispers of the crowd and the scrape and crunch of the lone Earthling's dragging boots as they made wide furrows in the hard pebbly soil of the beach.

The men had fallen back a little, and now were a half circle around him down to the water's brink. The watch-beacon's light caught them full there, and threw great blots of shadows lakeward from them. Their ray-guns were gripped tighter as their shifty eyes darted from his huge bulk to the water ahead, and back. Doubt and fear swayed them all.

The Hawk wasted no time, but stepped out to knee-high level on the sharply shelving bottom. At this Tantril objected.

"Hold, Carse!" he roared. "You play for time, I think! Where is this point of attack?"

The bloated figure did not answer him, but bent over as if searching for something under the tiny waves which now were slapping his thigh. He reached one hand down and probed around with it, apparently feeling. The eyes watching him were wide and fear-fascinated.

"HERE—or no," the Hawk muttered to himself, though a dozen could hear him. "A little farther, I think. . . . Here—but no, I forgot: the tide has come in. A little farther. . . ." He stopped sud-

denly and straightened, turned to the Venusian chief. "Don't forget, Lar Tantril, you have promised I can go free!"

Then he resumed his search of the bottom, the black surface of water up to his waist. Again the fearful Venusian leader roared an objection:

"You're tricking us, Carse, you little devil—"

'Oh, don't be an ass!" Carse snapped back. "As if I could get away—your ray-guns on me!"

Another half minute passed; a few more short steps were taken. A muttered oath came from one of the wet, uncomfortable men in the grip of fear. Several there were on the brink of turning in a panicky dash for the safety of the enclosure behind, the warm buildings, guarded by ray-batteries—and yet an awful fascination held them. What metallic horror of the deeps was being exposed?

"Just a second, now," the Hawk was murmuring. "You'll all see. . . . Somewhere . . . right . . . here . . . somewhere. . . ."

He held them taut, expectant. The water licked around the waist of his suit. One more slow step; one more yet.

"Here!" he cried triumphantly, and clicked his face-plate closed. And the men who stared, faces pale, hearts pounding, ray-guns at the ready, saw him no longer. The water had closed over that shiny metal helmet. Only a mocking ripple was left.

Hawk Carse was gone!

GONE!—and laughing to himself.

The space-suit, his heavy prison of metal and fabric, would protect him from water as well as from space! It offered his golden—his only—opportunity. It had been pierced by Tantril's shots, back in the house, but only the gravity-plate compartments, which were sealed and separate. It was still—after he had closed the mittens—air-tight, an effective little submarine in the dark waters of the Great Briney!

So Carse followed his black course over the lake-bottom laughing and laughing. In his mind he could see what he had left behind: the men, shivering there in the water for an instant, completely befogged, and perhaps firing one or two shots at where he had disappeared; then turning and breaking back in a grand rush for the fence and safety. And the ray-batteries, all manned and centered on the lake; Tantril, in a very fury of rage, but fearful, preparing for a siege; preparing for anything that might loom suddenly from the water! And all of them wondering what lay beneath its calm surface; what he, Hawk Carse, had gone to join!

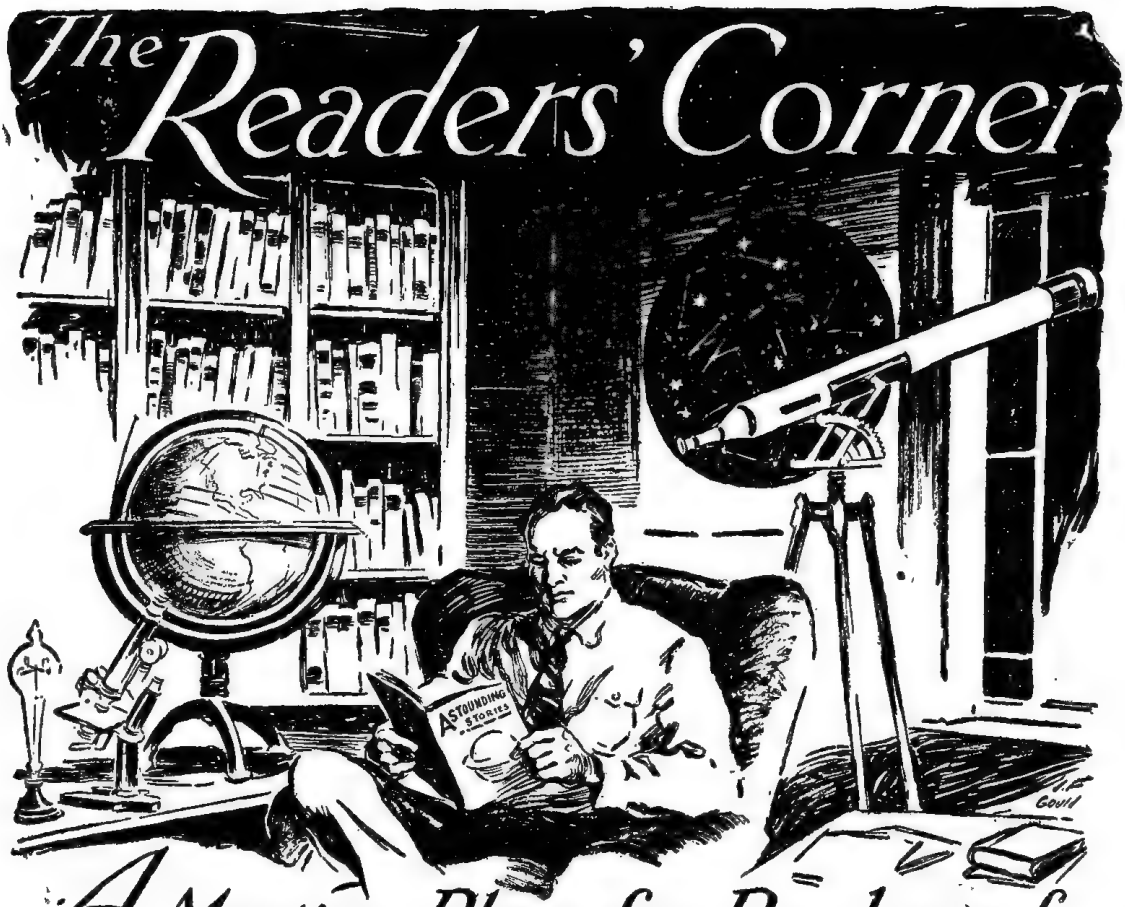
For days they would stare fearfully at the lake, while the tides rolled steadily in and out; for days the ray-batteries would be held ready, and none would venture outside the fence. It might take hours for the realization of his trick to sink in—but they still would not be sure of anything, and would have to keep vigilant against the still-possible attack.

Fourteen miles up the coast was Ban Wilson's ranch, and Eliot Leithgow and Friday waiting there. He would rest for a while, and then the three of them would go home to the laboratory—whose location was now still secret. And then, later, there was his promise to the coordinated brains to be kept. . . .

But that was in the future. For the present, he went his dark, watery way laughing. Laughing and laughing again. . . .

Yes, John Sewell, first of all Hawk Carse's traits was his resourcefulness!

The Readers' Corner



A Meeting Place for Readers of Astounding Stories

Foreign Perspective

Dear Editor:

In the local bookseller's yesterday, I picked up a copy of Astounding Stories, glanced through it and took it home—and immediately, after reading one story, went back and bought some other copies that were in the shop.

The stories I liked best in the September issue were: "The Copper-Clad World," by Harl Vincent, "Brood of the Dark Moon," by C. W. Diffin, and "The God in the Box," by S. P. Wright. In one of the other copies I read the conclusion of "The Exile of Time," by Ray Cummings. It was a good yarn, but I am afraid that if ever a time-traveling machine were made, thousands, or rather, I should say, millions would want to travel in the future, see their fate, and go back and try to change their destiny. This would cause a lot of trouble and the machine would undoubtedly have to be destroyed. [That *would* be a mess!—Ed.]

I think that your front page illustrations are absolutely perfect, and no error. Some of the lurid pictures on other Science Fiction covers make me sick. After having read the all-too-few issues of Astounding Stories, I unhesitatingly say that it is the best mag on the American market, which is saying a lot. In fact, your mag leaves nothing to be desired in any way.—Edward S. H. Knight, 42 Montague Rd., Southall, Middlesex, Eng.

A Difference of Opinion

Dear Editor:

I have just finished looking through the "Corner" and reading "Giants on the Earth," and right now I want to say that I have nothing to say against this superb magazine, as it is the best on the market.

I'd like to compliment our friend in England, Leslie J. Johnson, on his fatalistic brainstorm. That was good.

I see that George N. Matyas is howling about slamming Russia. Why not? But I don't like the place where he pounds Captain Meek's ears. No fair. The Captain started his story against one single "Russky," Saranoff by name. He finally got around to this scoundrel's activities in Russia only long after he first thought of this horrid character.—Thomas Daniel, Box 247, Sidney, Nebr.

A "Seed" Flaw?

Dear Editor:

Once again I feel like commenting on your excellent magazine. This time it's

over "The Seed of the Toc-Toc Birds," which, although in my opinion the best story in the January issue, had one peculiar flaw. Mr. Flagg will, I am sure, agree with me. The question is: How long, Earth time, can an inhabitant of a sub-atomic world (admitting the existence of such a creature) exist? With the endless movement, collisions and changing temperature of the infinitesimal components of a cosmic universe it seems to me that the only possibility for life thereon would lie in a conception of time relativity. During the time of Talbot's absence from our Earth, a sub-atomic world such as described might spring into existence, produce life and be destroyed by cosmic action several times. A second of Earth time must necessarily include countless eons of time on such a minute world.

Readers, let me hear from you!—Arthur R. Hermann, 2460 N. 44th St., Milwaukee, Wis.

Resolutions

Dear Editor:

After reading the letters in "The Readers' Corner" each month, I experience a profound sense of depression, and meditate on the uselessness of life.

I've made two resolutions:

1—Nevermore will I write in to "our" magazine and suggest that changes or improvements be made. There are so many thousand letters (a dozen, anyway) telling the ed. how to run his magazine that I lose patience with the world in general. I don't see anything wrong with A. S. I don't care whether Paul illustrates, whether the pages are smooth, or reprints are used, or, in short, I don't care if the magazine never changes. The editor must be constantly worried trying to comply with the demands of would-be ed's. So, I'll never again pester him with fool ideas and criticisms. How about it, other readers?

2—My second resolution is one made for the year 1932. For the entire year I'll read one of the best fiction magazines ever published—good old Astounding Stories—and keep my mouth shut! (Maybe.) [Maybe.—Ed.]

I have been looking over the 1931 volume of our mag, and here's the verdict concerning the stories and authors:

Four authors were outstanding for their consistent contributing and the unfailing excellence of their work: Sewell Peaslee Wright, Capt. S. P. Meek, Ray Cummings, and Charles W. Diffin. The title "best" hovers uncertainly between Wright and Diffin. The next best group includes R. F. Starzl, Anthony Gilmore, Jack Williamson, Edmond Hamilton and Hal K. Wells. I chose Gilmore largely because of the splendid work done in "Hawk Carse." H. Thompson Rich, D. W. Hall, Arthur J. Burks, H. G. Winter and Schachner and Zagat also did fine writing.

Until the next time!—Louis C. Smith, 1908—98th Ave., Oakland, Calif.

Oh Sho, Sho

Dear Editor:

Astounding Stories has reached its second birthday, and is still enjoying good health. During this period there has been an improvement in the stories, but I will not say that the improvement has been extraordinary. This is due to the fact that the stories were most excellent to begin with, thus making impossible a marked improvement.

I believe that it would be impossible to put your finger on any one best story that appeared during 1931, but I do believe that the stories I have listed are about the best.

My list of the "corkers" are as follows: "The Tentacles from Below," "Beyond the Vanishing Point," "The Lake of Light," "Dark Moon," "When The Moon Turned Green," "Morale" and "If The Sun Died." The two best serials were "Giants on the Earth" and "The Exile of Time."

Wesso is not a bad artist, but lately he has been painting scenes for the covers that should never see the light of day on a Science Fiction magazine. I was disgusted to see an ape on the June cover, but when the January issue came along and our friend still retained his coveted position—! I don't think scenes such as these should be on the covers; the mag is too good for them. Wesso sure can draw marvelous scenes, so why should he waste his talent on those that have no bearing on S. F.?

I have been reading the magazine for a long time and never in all this period have I caught a "boner." This is due to the type of authors writing for us and to the ability of our ed. to pick out the best stories sent to him.—Edward F. Gervais, 512 So. Pennsylvania Ave., Lansing, Mich.

And Color, Too, of Course

Dear Editor:

I have read A. S. ever since it was first published, and can say that in my opinion it is the best mag of its kind in existence to-day.

I am absolutely in favor of leaving romance in the stories, since those without it are altogether too dry. I do not mean that all stories should have romance in them, but some should have.

The critics in the "Corner" are always crying to cut the pages even, to use a more extended type so that it will be easier to read and want better and more realistic pictures. Why not print it on rajah bond paper? use half-tone pictures with a phonograph attachment so we could have sound illustrations? use cloth-bound covers and wrap it in cellophane and see if that helps the stories any? Even then someone would want embossed heads. I say just "stet"—and publish it oftener.

I enjoyed Capt. S. P. Meek's "Giants on the Earth" immensely.

I would gladly correspond with other Readers, especially if they are scientifically argumentative.—Jack Lyons, Somerset, Ohio.

A Geranium for Burks

Dear Editor:

I have just finished reading the January issue of Astounding Stories and I wish to congratulate you on securing a fine story like "The Mind Master," by A. J. Burks.

The final installment of "Giants on the Earth" was as exciting as the first, and the first was a wow! Capt. S. P. Meek is at his best, however, I think, when spinning a Dr. Bird yarn. The Dr. Bird stories have a dash of science to them, and I think this makes or breaks a story. Some do not care for science in their S. F., but I hope that you never print a story without at least a tiny bit of science content.—Fred C. Miles, 3000 Springfield Ave., New Providence, N. J.

Believe It or Not!

Dear Editor:

To my fellow readers of Astounding Stories, let me offer you a tip. You all want stories by the authors whose work appears in Astounding Stories. Well, you will find them also at their best under the Clayton Banner in the new magazines, namely Strange Tales and Soldiers of Fortune. May I repeat? Enjoy all these promising authors' work by subscribing to "our" latest mags. [This is *not* a solicited or paid-for letter—honest!—Ed.]

Long may the Clayton Banner wave above all worthwhile stories, as it has in the past.—George C. Kern, 2571 Main St., Buffalo, N. Y.

Good as Is

Dear Editor:

Now I want to say a word for your mag. It's swell the way it is. But put in some more stories like "Hawk Carse." I'll go goofy trying to think what the "Hawk" did to Dr. Ku Sui if you don't get a sequel to it! And for goodness sake don't put out a semi-monthly. Your mag is good the way it is. I fear the stories, if the demand for them is too pressing, may become virtually love crammed, like "The Danger from the Deep."

Cummings, Burks, Ernst, Diffin, Wright, Meek and Winter are the writers whose stories I like best.

Well, I'll sign off 'cause I know your time is limited.—Jack Iben, 822 Atlantic Ave., Monaca, Pa.

Every Day in Every Way . . . ?

Dear Editor:

Every month Astounding Stories seems to be getting better and better! Maybe the editor and the contributors are practicing Coueism? How about it?

The January, 1932, issue is great. A new story by Francis Flagg and the beginning of a two-part story by Burks. That's certainly giving us the goods. Paul Ernst's "The Radiant Shell" was a pretty good yarn. Why not more stories along this line? I don't mean especially about invisibility, but those that make us keep our feet on Earth.

I hope Cummings' new story announced for next month is not a rehash of his old ones. A really original tale by this writer would be a wow! But this "Wandl, the Invader," sounds as if it was merely another interplanetary story. Well, we'll see.

Lilith Lorraine wrote an outstanding story in one of your early issues. Why not more by her?

About the Paul and Wesso controversy. I think Paul is certainly the peer of Wesso in drawing machinery, but Wesso has it on Paul for other drawings. Paul's men are too wooden-like and stiff. Wesso did a swell job of the January cover.

A suggestion for improving your magazine: have a different story in each issue to balance the purely action type. I like action, but not for every yarn. It gets monotonous after a while. Clark Ashton Smith is a good writer of different stories, and so is Francis Flagg.—Paul Thibault, 401 So. 33rd St., San Diego, Cal.

A Weekly?

Dear Editor:

As a reader of S. F. magazines, I was much struck by the last four issues of A. S. Diffin, Cummings, Vincent, Flagg, Ernst and Meek certainly make an outstanding list of authors in this field. I like Burks too, and "Manape the Mighty" certainly gets a big hand from me. But for sheer ingenuity in twisting a story into the unexpected, give me "Heads of Apex." That was a wow!

I like stories that have something to them besides the action—though I want some action too.

Why not give us A. S. weekly?—George P. Legler, Box 268, Tucson, Ariz.

Yessir!

Dear Editor:

Last evening I secured the January edition of Astounding Stories, and as usual I turned first to the "Corner" to look over the various comments. You know, Mr. Editor, each time I have read the various letters printed in your department I have had an urge to sit down and write you various ideas that have come to me, and each time I have put it off. This time the urge is too strong. So, donning my literary toga, I sat me down to my trusty typewriter.

First: with regard to edges of the pages. It matters not to me whether the edges are smooth or rough. When anyone says it is impossible to find one's place with rough

edges, that person is talking through his hat. Many such critics also state in their letters that the magazine is so interesting that they never leave it until they have finished it. Why, therefore, the need of finding the place they left off? Bunk [An old Earth term meaning, "How can it be possible?"—Ed.]! Let them read some of the famous Roycroft editions, one of which costs as much as two or three years' subscription to A. S. The edges of these volumes are all uneven. I can show some of these critics books in my own library that are worth up to $100 and the edges of pages are all uneven. But enough of that. Let's go on.

Second: many criticize the quality of the paper. What can they expect if they give the magazine to a baby to play with, or use it for something to set a kettle on in order that they may not mar the varnish of the table? I have a complete file of A. S. and every one is in as good condition as when I bought it. I suppose some of them will answer by saying that if I were not so miserly I would let friends read them. But if everybody did that there would not be much of a sale of publications. Someone has said: "Books are your friends; don't lend them." I wish I had all the books I have lost through lending. Suffice it to say, my file of A. S. is perfect —covers, pages and staples.

Third: regarding reprints. Times change, and we must, perforce, change with the times. Therefore Science Fiction —at least much of it—that was such 25 or 50 years ago, is history now. Such of it as is worth while—and there was much—can be found at any public library. Other stories have been reprinted by other Science Fiction magazines. Why follow in their paths and duplicate what they have done? Interplanetary adventure is interesting to us to-day—at least they are to me—but what of the days when such things shall have become commonplace? It will no longer be Science Fiction, but science history.

Fourth: regarding size. It is really too silly to comment on this. One reader says the magazine is so small it is hidden by other magazines of greater size. How absurd! To him I say, "You have a tongue, haven't you? Ask and you shall receive. That's what the storekeeper is for—to give you service." As for quarterlies and annuals, forget them. There is a limit to a man's purse. You, as editor, have hewed out a path: stick to it. It has led us to interesting lands. Don't stray into the other fellow's well-worn path.

The only criticism I have on the stories is the fact that so many are about two men who tackle some evil planet that means ill to the earth. These super-heroes conquer said planet, marry the one gal and return to the jumping-off place and all ends well. Oh yeah? Well, you picture for yourself a lone man trying to conquer the very next town, village, hamlet situated right next to your own town, and just imagine what a job he would have cut out for himself. It simply could not be done, even though he were armed with the latest in arms and ammunition, and the inhabitants of said village had nothing but sticks and stones. They'd get him before long. Friend authors, give the other planets a break; at least send an army or a fleet. Don't make your heroes all lone wolves.

Without going deeply into the matter, I will simply say that I do not care for time-travel stories. Why? Because they are impossible. I have as much imagination as the next fellow, yet I cannot visualize the eternal God of this universe endowing anyone with power to peer into the future. What a hell it would be for you and me if we could look into the future and see that we were to die in 1935. Oh no, that's a gift—no, a curse—that a just God has withheld from mankind. As for the past, imagine going back to the Revolution, participating in a battle and killing one's ancestor, thus making it impossible for one to be born! And when some of the stories have the villain or hero hopping back and forth from one age to another as though he were on the 8:15 train to the next city—well, I throw up my hands. Help!

In concluding, please notice that nowhere in this letter have I referred to A. S. as "our" mag. Such an expression, in my mind, is sickening. If a magazine is a magazine it is at least worthy the dignity of such a name. Call it that. And as to being "ours," it isn't. The one we buy is ours, none other. Call a spade a spade, not a club.

This lengthy diatribe has assumed almost the aspects of a short story, but since this is the first time I have written you I have had to incorporate in it the stored up musings of many months. Try to get it somewhere in the "Corner" "in toto," as to leave out a part of it spoils the whole. Thank you.—Henry A. Raymond, 77 Warren Ave., Brockton, Mass.

"The Readers' Corner"

All readers are extended a sincere and cordial invitation to "Come over in 'The Readers' Corner'" and join in our monthly discussion of stories, authors, scientific principles and possibilities—everything that's of common interest in connection with our Astounding Stories.

Although from time to time I may make a comment or so, this is a department primarily for readers, and I invite you to make full use of it. Likes, dislikes, criticisms, explanations, roses, brickbats, suggestions—everything's welcome here; so "Come over in 'The Readers' Corner'" and discuss it with all of us!

—The Editor.

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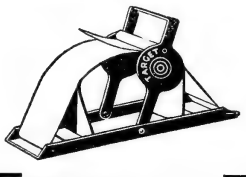

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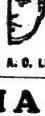

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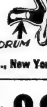

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